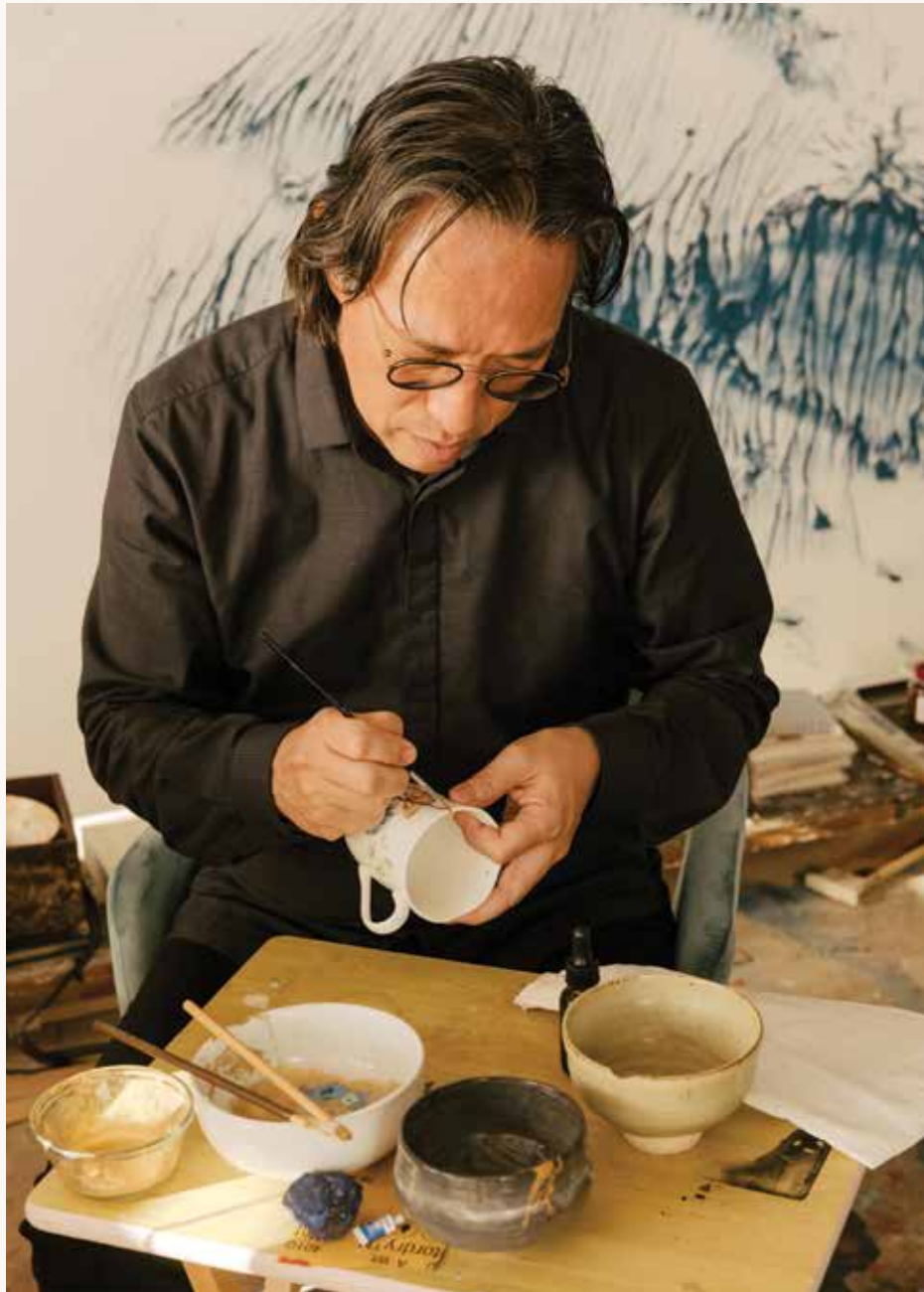


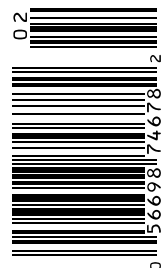
GOD IS IN THE MAKING

**ARTIST MAKOTO FUJIMURA ON
LOVING WHAT IS BROKEN AND
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Vol. 50 No. 2

faith in action for social justice

PRAYING WITH
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"HOW FAR CAN A MESSIAH GET FOCUSING ON THOSE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PECKING ORDER?"

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"So What Is It They're Asking You to Do?" Longtime civil rights activist Ruby Sales talks with Da'Shawn Mosley about technology, history, and finding one's own voice.

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Correction: Due to an editing error, Tomás Insua's commentary, "The Global Church Races to Carbon Zero" (Dec. 2020), said "Earth's fossil fuels will be depleted" in 50 years. Actually, fossil fuels will remain, but continued extraction at the current rate will contribute to catastrophic climate disruption.

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From the Editor

We've experienced a season of transitions here in the nation's capital. Coinciding with the onset of a new political administration, at Sojourners we've also been going through a significant passing of the torch. Adam Russell Taylor has taken up the mantle as new president of the organization, as part of a multiyear succession process. Outgoing president and cofounder Jim Wallis will continue to work with Sojourners in a variety of capacities and starting this fall will also have a new full-time faculty position and found a new center at Georgetown University on faith, public life, and the common good.

Longtime civil rights activist Ruby Sales and associate editor Da'Shawn Mosley talk in this issue about a different kind of transition: the task of empowering an emerging generation of leaders. Sales asks the provocative question, "What does it mean to look at oneself through the gaze of one's own history?" and encourages people "to touch their full capacities as human beings" and "not see themselves through the eyes of the empire." Those are challenges—and invitations—that apply to us all.

RESPONSE

A Dilemma Indeed

In "Privacy, Bought and Sold" (December 2020), Danny Duncan Collum wrote about the Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma* and how social media platforms are "worse than we thought." Comments on Facebook (ironically) agreed: "A couple years ago I noticed that using Facebook as it's intended, to socialize with people ... was having a negative impact on my psychological welfare. I was oversharing, I was sabotaging my own boundaries, and I was having crappy feelings about my interactions," wrote Helle Znerlo [f](#). "Social media use has been linked to [increased] depression across the board. Limiting [it] is surely a healthy idea for everyone!" wrote Nick Boyes [f](#). Lori White Burzlaff [f](#) added, "It's time to regulate these mediums and have alternatives."

Write us: response@sojo.net



"TO SPEAK A TRUE WORD IS TO TRANSFORM THE WORLD."

Paulo Freire

*Author, **Pedagogy of the Oppressed***

CONTRIBUTING



Reta Halteman Finger

Churches aren't equipped to understand the Bible's literary and sociological context, says writer and biblical scholar Reta Halteman Finger. Her study of Matthew 11 (p. 28) illustrates reading beyond linguistic and cultural assumptions. Finger often told students, "[The Bible] is probably the oldest literature you will ever read. These people did not grow up in the U.S. We have to read it in that cultural context, or we're going to get it wrong."



Isaac S. Villegas

"I can't think about God without a multitude of faces flashing into my mind," says Isaac S. Villegas, whose pastoral ministry has led to classrooms in maximum security prisons and to denominational and ecumenical board rooms. "The men on death row, members of my church, comrades at my side as we protest police violence—I see them all when I open the Bible." His perspectives (p. 48) challenge readers to reckon with our neighbors—humans and all other life.

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9%

Black Lives Matter demonstrations last year that were met with government intervention

54%

Of interventions by authorities in BLM demonstrations, 54 percent used force, such as tear gas and rubber bullets

3%

All other types of demonstrations last year that were met with government intervention

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The mission of *Sojourners* magazine is to inspire hope and action by articulating the biblical call to racial and social justice, life and peace, and environmental stewardship.

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1

MOBILIZING HOPE

BY ADAM RUSSELL TAYLOR

BRIDGING THE GAP

In his first speech as president-elect, Joe Biden outlined four priorities his incoming administration plans to address: systemic racism, the COVID-19 crisis, climate change, and economic hardship and recovery. I am encouraged not just by the breadth of policy detail and ambition in his Build Back Better platform but also by the radically different narrative for the nation and its future. These four pillars should resonate for people across the diversity of the church, and they will require that we generate significant political will, urgency, and accountability within the new administration and Congress to achieve progress on these priorities and more. Along with policy reforms, we also face an imperative to renew our broken and toxic political culture.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus proclaims, “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desola-

**WE ARE AT AN
INFLECTION POINT
IN OUR NATION'S
POLITICS.**

“THERE ARE NO QUICK FIXES OR MAGIC BULLETS.”

tion, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand” (Matthew 12:25). This profound truth is relevant for the church and for the nation.

We are at an inflection point in our nation’s politics, facing an essential choice between a politics of division and a politics of the common good. The politics of division manipulates and trades in fear, hatred, and hypocrisy, what the theologian and mystic Howard Thurman referred to as the three hounds of hell. The politics of division stokes an “us versus them” and zero-sum mentality. The politics of division exploits people’s fears and grievances. It reasserts the lie that some Americans are “more American” than others. It is fueled by falsehoods, hyperselfishness, and eroding public trust in institutions and the media.

The politics of division also feeds on what political scientists refer to as affective polarization rather than differences on the issues; many Americans are closer together on controversial issues than is often portrayed in the media. But it’s more difficult to find commonality on issues when our perceived differences are tied to core parts of our group iden-

tity. This challenge is compounded within the church because, for far too many Christians, political identity has become fused with white supremacy and Christian nationalism.

How do we move from a politics of division to a politics of the common good? There are no quick fixes or magic bullets, but I believe this will require transformation at every level, from local communities to the nation as a whole. It starts with emphasizing our shared values and aspirations and working together to solve common challenges. It also requires changing the perverse incentives in our politics that too often reward a politics of division. This will require real changes, including major ethics reforms, the elimination of gerrymandered districts that so often favor extreme candidates, reinstating the Voting Rights Act to combat voter suppression, and rooting out the cancer of disinformation that has infiltrated, and is often elevated on, social media platforms.

Our faith calls us not only to love our neighbors as ourselves but also to the even harder work of listening to and loving our enemies, including those we disagree with politically. This can be done in a spirit of love without compromising our commitment to truth-telling and to seeking justice. A politics of the common good could help redeem our public life, putting the welfare and interests of the nation, particularly the most vulnerable, over the narrow pursuit of partisanship, greed, and power. ✕



Adam Russell Taylor is president of Sojourners.



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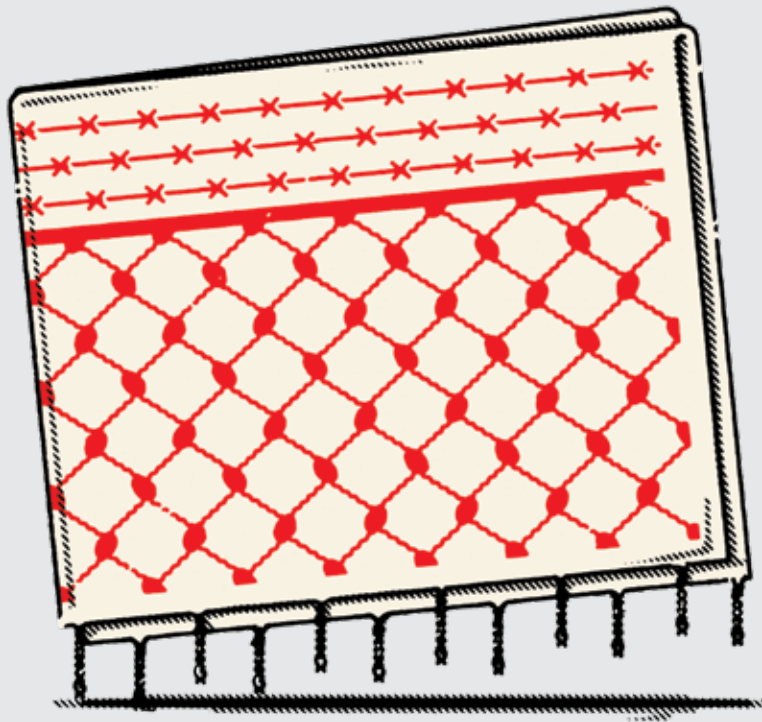
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COURAGEOUS NEXT STEPS

Simply reversing Trump's more extreme
Israel/Palestine policies will not be enough.



2

The Trump administration was an utter catastrophe for those who care about justice and peace in Israel/Palestine. U.S. policy was entrusted to right-wing settlement supporters such as Ambassador David Friedman and Jared Kushner and Christian Zionists such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

The administration applauded—and legalized—settlement expansion, showing utter disdain for international law. They displayed blatant antagonism to Palestinians by moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, cutting off financial aid to Palestinian hospitals and the U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, and closing the Palestinian Liberation Organization office in Washington. They capped it all by promoting fake “peace” alternatives, such as Trump’s disastrous “Peace to Prosperity” plan and the normalization agreements with Gulf countries. These policies aimed to appease the most hard-right policies of Israel and the eschatological fantasies of evangelical Christian Zionists, rather than seeking genuine peace or justice.

The Biden administration is likely to reverse some of these extreme steps. Biden has already signaled, however, that he would not reverse the embassy move, nor support any measures for conditioning aid to Israel based on its behavior. Biden's policy will likely be marked by a return to the traditional policies of the Obama era, which included anemic objections to renewed settlement expansion, verbal support for a two-state solution, and vague references to international law, while resisting any pressure on Israel to actually comply with international law or create a sovereign Palestinian state.

But even if Biden reversed *all* of Trump's actions and returned to Obama's positions, that would hardly advance peace and justice in that part of the world. New and bold initiatives are needed. They might not solve the problem entirely, but they can constitute real progress toward a just solution for Israel/Palestine and the region.

What are the courageous next steps? Biden can lay down the criteria for bringing Hamas into the peace process (as was done with the PLO). He can cease providing the diplomatic umbrella that protects Israel's most blatant actions from the requirements of international law. He can use the considerable leverage of the U.S. to achieve concrete changes in the lives of people by demanding an end to the siege of Gaza, administrative detentions, midnight arrests of children, trials for children in military courts, house demolitions, and the use of torture and collective punishments against the Palestinian population. All these steps can be achieved without jeopardizing Israel's security or prejudicing the ultimate outcome of any peace negotiations between the parties.

Ultimately, the Biden administration must either insist on respect for international law and genuine movement toward Palestinian statehood, or the U.S. must face the reality that a two-state solution is no longer possible and begin the process of addressing equality and genuine democracy in all of historic Palestine.

While it may be too much to expect any U.S. administration to act with fairness in this area, Christians who are concerned with justice, human rights, and the interests of both Israelis and Palestinians must start thinking in new terms.

It is time to envision a new reality be-

CHRISTIANS CONCERNED WITH JUSTICE FOR ISRAELIS AND PALESTINIANS MUST START THINKING IN NEW TERMS.

yond the two-state solution. With more than 700,000 Jewish settlers living as lords and masters in segregated communities in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, a Palestinian Arab state in those areas may be impossible to implement. Perhaps the true interests of both Palestinians and Israeli Jews can be met in a unitary state in all of Palestine if both sides are willing or forced to abandon exclusivist terms that deny and demonize the other. Without claiming any symmetry between the two parties, theirs has been a zero-sum conflict. Both Zionism (calling for an exclusively Jewish state) and Palestinian Nationalism (calling for an Arab state) have failed to eliminate the other group or to meet the needs of their own people. To end the conflict, both movements must be called into question; both must be required to address the interests of the other.

This requires a radical prophetic position that may be too difficult for any administration, but certainly one that Christians attuned to justice can strive toward. Meanwhile, we can work for specific interim steps to alleviate suffering, avoid demonization, and end the practice of one-sided support to *either* party in this conflict. ❖

Jonathan Kuttub, author of *Beyond The Two-State Solution*, is a Palestinian Christian and human rights lawyer.




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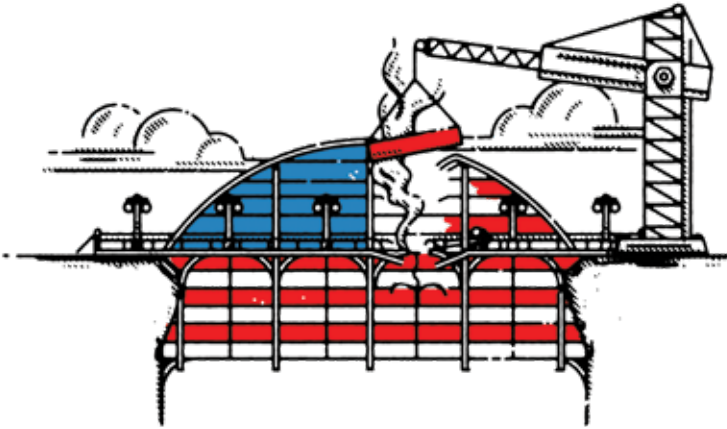
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COMMENTARY

BY JIM SIMPSON

**WE NEED A BOLD
LEAP FORWARD.**

THE FIRST 100 DAYS

Biden must do more than simply clean up Trump's mess.

As the Biden administration enters the White House, it must focus not only on repairing the damage caused by four years of the Trump administration but also push forward a bold agenda using all available channels: unilateral executive actions, the rule-making process, and collaboration with Congress. Here's a wish list for the first 100 days.

While we await mass distribution of a COVID-19 vaccine, Americans are living through some of the highest infection and death numbers we've seen at any point in the pandemic. A coordinated national response to the coronavirus must be a top priority for the administration. This includes a national mask mandate, a robust and coordinated federal strategy, a national vaccine distribution strategy, and additional support and stimulus to individuals, health systems, and states to address the health and economic impacts of the disease.

While the wealthy and those with stocks and investments have only seen their wealth *increase* over the past year, the gap between the richest and poorest Americans has expanded dramatically. A progressive economic agenda is needed to bolster and support those with low and middle incomes (roughly 80 percent of Americans). The priorities should include rolling back tax cuts for the wealthiest; forgiving federal student debt; increasing the federal minimum wage; ensuring access to paid sick and family leave and affordable child care; modernizing unemployment insurance; and introducing a budget that supports safety net programs and invests in the people and communities struggling the most.

Following Trump's four years of attempts to dismantle the Affordable Care Act and push millions of people off of their insurance even in the midst of a historic pandemic, the Biden administration must work to protect and expand the basic principles of the ACA to ensure that all

Americans have access to affordable and effective health insurance. We need to look seriously at how to *improve* the ACA rather than foment anxiety about its demise.

On immigration, Biden must end the "public charge" rule that may prevent lawful permanent residence or visa applications if the applicant has received government assistance, such as Section 8 housing or food assistance; the executive orders banning foreign nationals and refugees from specific predominantly Muslim countries from entering the U.S.; and expansion of the U.S.-Mexico "border wall." He must increase the refugee cap to levels higher than during the Obama administration. And, most importantly, he must create a path to citizenship for the nearly 11 million immigrants currently living in the U.S.

On climate, the new administration must reinstate the more than 125 environmental rules ended by the Trump administration, rejoin the Paris Agreement, invest in renewable energy, and work toward net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2035.

The murder of George Floyd requires renewed focus on our stark racial inequities. The administration must lead fresh conversations on police and criminal justice reform, focus on the racial wealth gap, and create a U.S. Commission on Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation.

In foreign policy, the administration needs to reengage collaboratively in international bodies; rejoin the Iran nuclear deal; and show support for the nuclear weapons ban treaty.

Americans will not be satisfied with a simple "reset" after four years of Trump. The new administration needs to take us on a giant leap forward. We need a creative, captivating vision for the U.S. in the mid-21st century—one in which all who live in this country see a future for themselves. A country where everyone can live in peace and unafraid. ✪

Jim Simpson is director of the president's office and advocacy at Sojourners.

W

TEACHING THE
HOLOCAUST

We'd all like to think that empathy is a primary motivator in our lives. The ability to understand and share the emotions of another feels like an intrinsically human characteristic. But what happens when society erodes our collective empathy in service of a very individualistic worldview; when the world asks us time and time again to gloss over our mistakes instead of learning from them? Who are we to each other when we stop asking questions about the impacts and consequences of our actions?

Recently the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany released the first-ever 50-state survey conducted on Holocaust knowledge among millennials and Generation Z in the U.S. The data is alarming.

More than 60 percent of survey respondents did not know that 6 million Jews were murdered during the Holocaust; nearly 50 percent could not name a single concentration or work camp, though there were more than 40,000 in operation during World War II; and more than 10 percent believed that Jews themselves caused the Holocaust.

These statistics are terrifying. Knowledge increases our ability to treat one another with respect despite our differences. How do we move forward as a global society, especially in a country as diverse as the United States, when so many people lack such crucial information?

It's not just knowledge we're missing. We're also missing crucial demographic data about the survey respondents themselves, including their religious affiliation, educational attainment, and socio-economic class. Even without this demographic information, we know that the knowledge and understanding about this



genocidal event among millennials and Gen Zers across the U.S. does not cut it. We need to do better.

Building knowledge about global atrocities such as the Holocaust can become the foundation for building empathy. Knowledge and acknowledgement of the Holocaust across faith communities allows us to share our tragedy and pain collectively. All religious communities have a responsibility to educate younger generations about the dynamics and impacts of supremacist ideologies in order to ensure respect for all traditions and for the histories of all people.

Younger generations are hungering for this knowledge. A hopeful light shone through all the survey findings: Sixty-four percent of all U.S. millennials and Gen Zers believe that Holocaust education should be compulsory in school. And 80 percent of all respondents believe that it's important to continue teaching about the Holocaust.

Our communities need to be intentional about what we're teaching, why we're teaching it, and if we're effectively communicating the lessons we intend. Teaching about the Holocaust and other genocidal events should be our "booster shot" to ensure that we never forget and to energize our communities to prevent such atrocities from ever happening again.

We have a collective moral responsibility to create a world that promotes justice and builds respect for all. History shows how weak we are when we refuse to learn from past mistakes or are blind to each other's humanity. Empathy doesn't cost a thing. ❖

**YOUNGER
GENERATIONS ARE
HUNGERING FOR
THIS KNOWLEDGE.**

Rev. Mark E. Fowler is CEO of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding in New York.



THE HUNGRY SPIRIT

BY ROSE MARIE BERGER

IN PARADISE, THEY PLAY JAZZ



When the chaos gets too much, I listen to jazz. I'm not an aficionado. I just know that brave jazz refreshes my freedom. Lately, I've been listening to a lot of jazz.

The stay of execution offered by a COVID-19 vaccine allows for a giddy, perilous optimism. Even a minute crack in our coronavirus armor brings up emotions too dangerous, too chaotic to express: A trembling wave of the suffering we have endured, heavy across the shoulders like the splintery weight of the cross.

For ballast against overwhelming rage, I turn to *The Five Quintets* by poet Micheal O'Siadhail: "Be with me Madam Jazz I urge you now, / Riff in me so I can conjure how / You breathe in us more than we dare allow."

Miles Davis' *Sketches of Spain*, particularly "Solea," is a mainstay for this kind of Lent. A reviewer described this 12-minute composition—part flamenco, part blues—as "a revelation of spirituality in solitude." According to the liner notes, the rhythms were so complex that some in the orchestra found it hard to stay in tempo. But Davis' trumpet cuts like a sword of truth over the martial clatter of hooves on cobblestones and Calvary's unrelenting military tattoo, while the snare keeps up a marching beat toward the inevitable outcome on Golgotha. Davis seems to "capture" the crucifixion in complex *cante jondo* ("deep song"). Suffering does not have the final word. The melody is so strong, Davis said, "that the softer you play it, the stronger it gets."

I've also been listening to the sacred choral music of cool jazz legend Dave Brubeck. Brubeck not only pioneered the 1950s West Coast jazz sound but made art that deepened faith immersed in justice. Raised as a Presbyterian, he joined the Catholic Church as an adult. His experiences in World War II, where he led the first racially integrated Army band, became fodder for his songs on the tragedy of war and the things that make for peace. War changed him. Surviving war changed him. "Fifty-six million people died because they forgot 'Thou shalt not kill,'" he said.

In 1968, Brubeck composed an oratorio to "remind people of the

**"IS MUSIC PLEASURE,
PRAYER, AND
PRAISE IN ONE?"**

true beliefs of Christianity.” *The Light in the Wilderness*, Brubeck’s first sacred choral work, opens with his complicated and unnerving soundscape of Jesus’ baptism and wilderness temptations. “The temptation to rationalize one’s compromising as a means to gain idealistic ends is the theme of the wilderness dialogue between Jesus and the Devil,” wrote Brubeck in the performance notes. The chiasmic hinge of the oratorio speaks directly to the horror of war in the section “Love your enemies,” with the baritone soloist repeating the call “Love your enemies and do good to those who hurt you.”

Despite similarly themed later works, it’s *The Real Ambassadors*, written by Brubeck and his wife Iola in the late 1950s, that I’ve turned to during the four years of Trump’s assault and our long year of isolation. *Ambassadors* is a collaboration with Louis Armstrong (also a Catholic). Brubeck intended the work as a satire of the State Department’s Cold War “cultural diplomacy” programs. The government sent Black jazz ambassadors around the world while maintaining Jim Crow America at home.

At the 1962 Monterey Jazz Fest, Armstrong’s interpretation of the piece “They Say I Look Like God” brought the audience to their knees. What Brubeck wrote as parody, Armstrong sang straight. The chorus opens with a medieval plainchant rendering from Genesis 1:27 (“In God’s image, he created them”).

With Brubeck’s spare piano as intermediary, Armstrong’s Third Ward-inflected bass vocals rolled like a king tide: “They say I look like God. Could God be Black?” Armstrong sang. “You raised us from the dust and breathed a life with trust and gave to man the great choice to be alone on earth or one with Thee. ...When will that great day come? ... When God tells man he’s really free.” In the recording, you can hear his voice drop with emotion in repetition of the final phrase, “really free.”

Jazz is the consummation of all that is truly human, the best of our polyphonic harmonies, a wild, joyful freedom born of shared suffering. “Is music pleasure, prayer, and praise in one?” asks O’Siadhail. “The horns and harps of paradise play jazz.”

Rose Marie Berger, author of *Bending the Arch*, is senior editor of *Sojourners* magazine.

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MOVING MOUNTAINS BY LISA SHARON HARPER

FORWARD HEALING



F

Four years of verbal abuse. Four years of draconian policies that eviscerated the dignity of people who were not white, Christian, male, or citizens; of police-involved fatal shootings of Black men, women, and children with impunity; increasing climate disasters; government corruption; Russian bots and “fake news”; “very fine people on both sides”; families ripped apart; the

white church’s loyalty to whiteness, not Brown Jesus. Four years of betrayal. Four years.

And one year of COVID-19, of disaster coupled with a disastrous response, of hibernation. One year of death.

We are a traumatized nation. As the U.S. enters the next era with a new administration, it is tempting to do as our foremothers and forefathers were taught: When they returned home from a war or survived domestic abuse, they were counseled to put it behind them. They didn’t talk about it, and the wounds grew scars, and the scars took over the bodies of our family systems.

But there is another way. We don’t have to stuff down our pain this time. We can lean into the next year of promise with the kind of expectation that fuels our healing. Dr. James S. Gordon, author of *The Transformation: Discovering Wholeness and Healing After Trauma*, offers several practices that victims of trauma can do to forward their healing. Besides typical trauma therapies such as EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing), which deal directly with trauma-induced thought patterns, Gordon recommends several structures and practices to which we people of faith have ready access. Here are my top three:

1. Befriend your body.

For nearly a year, I hovered within 10 pounds of my all-time highest

**THERE IS ANOTHER WAY.
WE DON’T HAVE TO STUFF DOWN
OUR PAIN THIS TIME.**

weight. As we entered 2020, I had a revelation: I was living as if I had no body, ordering out every meal, always traveling, in the air more than on the ground. I decided to do a healing fast and cleanse to reconnect myself to my body. Turns out there’s science behind this. Gordon explains that trauma produces chemicals that damage the digestive track. Getting rid of toxic foods and replacing them with proteins and vegetables can make a world of difference. That’s exactly what I did. I also sought somatic therapy—therapy that helps us reconnect with, listen to, and understand our bodies. Eleven months and 53 pounds later, I have a new relationship with my body, one grounded in the call to care.

2. Shake and dance.

Grey’s Anatomy is still my favorite show. Drs. Christina Yang and Meredith Grey used to dance and shake their bodies to release the stress of their days as surgeons. Turns out, there’s science to that, too! According to Gordon, shaking and dancing releases energy stored in our bodies during periods of trauma. So let’s heal from 2020 by shaking it off—literally!

3. The healing circle.

Every Friday evening, I log onto Instagram to host a #KitchenTableConvo with whoever joins me. I’m amazed how that group of a few thousand fellow travelers comes together every week. We check in with each other, process the week, and reflect on one deep thought together. Gordon says small groups can serve as spaces where we are safe to be as we are, in the moment, without judgement. That alone can advance healing.

As we enter the hope of 2021, let’s meet our bodies again. Let’s dance and shake 2020 out of our systems. Let’s heal together. ✕

Lisa Sharon Harper is president of FreedomRoad.us and the author of several books, including the forthcoming *Fortune*, the story of her family and a call for reparations.

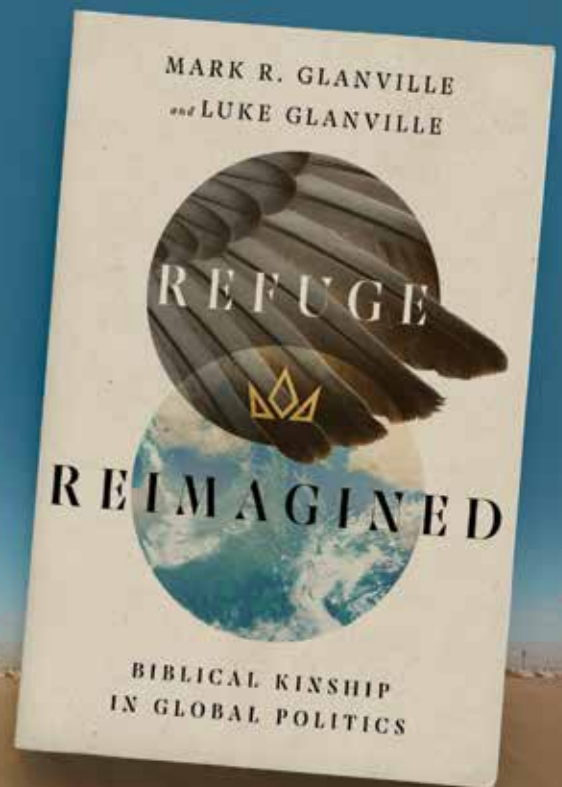
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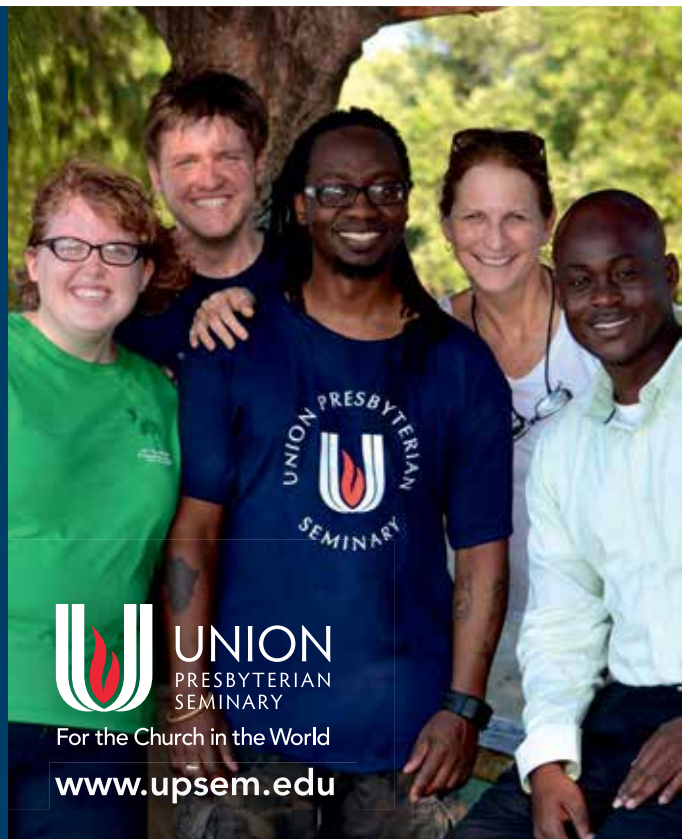
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EYEWITNESS

4

**"IT'S FOR ALL THE
PEOPLE HURT IN THE
PAST WHO WEREN'T
ABLE TO SPEAK THEIR
TRUTH."**



A MEMORIAL TO SURVIVORS

“When Sarah Super asked if I would help create a memorial to survivors of rape and sexual assault, I said ‘yes’ immediately. I’m also a survivor, so it was a no-brainer. Burying pain will not help us recover.

The memorial [in Minneapolis] is painful, but it’s not just pain. I call the first [of the five] panels ‘Sorrow.’ A person in red is curled up in the snow. It’s dark; there are trees everywhere. In panel two are two figures: the same figure, who is clearly crying, and a purple figure holding them. There’s a little sunrise on the horizon. We have a memorial to Holocaust victims. We have the new lynching memorial. And these things are making a difference.

In panel three, the original figure has a red dress on, symbolic of murdered and missing native women. Two women are helping her stand. It’s dawn and the trees are budding. In the fourth panel, the woman is walking and strong. It’s midsummer. She has a fist—she’s confident, [but] also ready to protect herself.

We call the fifth panel ‘The Ancestors.’ It’s all of the people hurt in the past who weren’t able to speak their truth. The figure is holding the hand of a woman in a wheelchair. I used to work in a nursing home with a woman who had cerebral palsy. She had been raped. She was nonverbal, so she told me what had happened by spelling it out on a board. I have never forgotten.

The Survivors Memorial feels like a sacred site. For the entire eight months it took to build, I burned sage every morning and said a prayer for the people that would see it—a prayer of healing. A prayer of love. A prayer of safety.” ✦

Lori Greene is a mosaic artist living in Minnesota. She spoke to Sojourners’ Jenna Barnett about creating the first permanent memorial to sexual violence survivors in the United States.





GOD IS

IN

Artist Makoto Fujimura on
loving what is broken and
the holy work of repair.

By Julie Polter

Photographs by Daniel Dorsa

THE

MAKING



Artist Makoto Fujimura uses materials and techniques from *nihonga*, a Japanese style of painting. The pigments are pulverized minerals and precious metals applied in multiple layers, in what he describes as “a slow process that fights against efficiency.” Prayer and contemplation are woven into the work. The tiny mineral

particles refract light, often creating subtle prismatic effects. It is a style of art made for the type of long, unforced gaze that slowly reveals evermore depth. Deceptively simple and quietly extravagant.

Fujimura’s thoughts on art, theology, and culture are, like his paintings, many-layered and refractive, celebrating God as love, beauty, and mercy while also contending with pain and desolation. He is a mystic as well as a painter, and in his latest book, *Art and Faith: A Theology of Making*, he speaks out of his spiritual and his artistic practice.

But Fujimura also builds on three decades of reaching far outside his studio to evangelize on the necessity of art for human thriving and the call to shift from fighting over culture to caring for and nurturing it. He founded the International Arts Movement in 1992, which facilitates connections and communication between groups seeking to creatively and positively impact the culture, whether they are from the arts, music, business, education, or social change organizations.

The “theology of making” Fujimura explores in his book centers on theologian N.T. Wright’s proposal that the resurrection of Jesus sparked “the unexpected launch of new creation, of the ‘kingdom of God,’ on earth as in heaven” and that humans are equipped and invited to work with God in advancing this new reign. (Wright wrote the foreword to *Art and Faith*.)

“God created beyond utility or need. God is all sufficient, and self-sufficient. In short (shockingly) God does not need us!” Fujimura told *Sojourners*. “Yet God chooses community over isolation, gratuitous creation over passivity. God invites us to co-labor toward the new.”

CONSIDER THE LILIES OF THE FIELD

Fujimura has at times seemed like a shuttle diplomat, moving between the church, arts institutions, and academic settings, attempting to negotiate an end—or at least a broad truce—to ongoing battles over culture, art, values, meaning, and even truth itself. He has long advocated that culture, rather than being territory to be conquered, is a “garden to tend ... an ecosystem to steward.”

This is an especially idealistic vision in our contentious and battered era, when whole segments of the church appear to be permanently entrenched in battle mode. Fujimura does not mince words about the damage Christians have done to culture and to their own witness.

“God is love,” Fujimura said. “Therefore, we followers of Christ must be all about love. Yet the church is seen as the sowers of hatred, divisiveness, and the power struggles of culture wars. We are projecting the opposite character-

istics of the fruits of the spirit.” He would remind us of Jesus’ exhortations to “look at the birds of the air” and “consider the lilies of the field” (Matthew 6:26, 28).

“We see extravagance of abundance everywhere in nature, and the delights of God hidden everywhere for us to discover,” said Fujimura. “Yet Christians fight culture wars as if the only path is to ‘defend our turf’—to war over scarcity-ridden, limited-resource environments.”

As an artist, Fujimura believes that “God’s purposes transcend way beyond our industrial, utilitarian pragmatism. God loves beauty and mercy exactly because they stand as antidote to the Darwinian mechanism of the ‘survival at all costs’ mindset that became normative for us after the Fall.”

This does not mean that the answer to our warring ways is a breezy “all you need is love” approach. Nor is the solution a facile peace that is won by papering over the damage done by power- or fear-driven societal conflicts or insists that art (or faith) must avoid pain or contention. Fujimura speaks often about trauma, personal and public. He knows that human imagination and creativity can produce weapons of mass destruction as well as transcendent beauty. (He speaks of his maternal grandfather, sent by the Japanese government in 1945 to survey the damage done to Hiroshima by the atomic bomb dropped on the city by the United States, and how his grandfather would not speak of what he’d seen for the rest of his life.)

In a 2019 commencement speech at Judson University, Fujimura named some of the losses, evils, and traumatic events of

**“THE DELIGHTS
OF GOD ARE
HIDDEN
EVERYWHERE
FOR US TO
DISCOVER.”**



that pre-COVID-19 time: “We see the fire that ravaged Notre Dame, we are numbed by another suicide bomber, perhaps haunted, as I am, of the white sepulchers of coral reefs in precious oceans. We witness the destruction of all ideologies of hope in politics. We roll our eyes at the scandals involving leaders in the world and in the church.”

So while Fujimura proclaims a God who “renews and generates,” he is also very clear: The path toward the New Creation, he writes in *Art and Faith*, “weaves through the brokenness of our world, our own lives, and the fissures created by various factions of faith institutions.”

BEHOLD THE PAINFUL BROKEN FRAGMENTS

Fujimura is a student of *kintsugi*—“golden repair”—the Japanese art of mending broken ceramics with lacquer mixed with precious metals, restoring a bowl or cup to wholeness and function while highlighting, rather than masking, the fractures. Objects repaired by kintsugi masters are often stunningly beautiful, veined with gold, silver, or platinum that trace a history of traumatic destruction and sublime redemption.

But behind each Instagram-ready bowl is a practice and tradition that doesn’t begin with the gold, but with the shards.

Kintsugi masters sometimes handed down a set of fragments through generations, contemplating the pieces—their beauty, their patina from use—for decades before beginning the repair, which itself might take years.

Likewise, we are invited to look with compassion and love on broken lives and broken systems as the starting point of repair, reform, or healing. “I actually think that there is virtue in being able to see the brokenness and fractures, as painful as they may be,” said Fujimura. Through the pandemic and other disasters of the past year, he noted that “we are given clear vision to see the reality beneath the facades of institutional power and leadership that have betrayed God’s design.” The lesson he draws from Japanese aesthetic values, his own experience of trauma, and the gospel itself is that “we must first learn to behold even those painful broken fragments as beautiful,” rather than rush to fix everything or hide the damage.

“This is not a cosmetic, Western notion of beauty,” he clarified, “but beauty accentuated by care of nature and our communities—beauty based on sacrifice,

which I believe the Japanese aesthetic has refined.” Western culture tends to emphasize tossing out broken things and replacing them with something new, or hiding the damage. “A Western path of ‘fixing’ assumes that the fractures are no longer seen, and the object looks as if nothing has happened,” Fujimura explained, a contrast with a Japanese aesthetic that values wear and tear. Likewise, “the Western teaching of the gospel has been disguised as ‘return to Eden’ perfection.”

In Fujimura’s reading of the gospels, the good news comes with scars. He cites how Jesus still has his wounds post-resurrection (see John 20, Thomas’ encounter with Jesus). “We can assume that the New Creation flows out of these sacred wounds,” he said.

TRAUMA AND THE TEARS OF CHRIST

Fujimura writes in *Art and Faith* that for several years he has meditated during Lent on chapters 11 and 12 of John’s gospel. In chapter 11, Jesus is summoned to the home of his friends Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus, who is sick. By the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus is dead and already laid in a tomb. Surrounded by grief and confronting death and decay, Jesus, scripture says, is deeply moved and cries. Fujimura makes the somewhat surprising assertion that “Jesus wept” (John 11:35) is the pivotal verse for his “theology of making.”

He writes that he sees in this verse “the entire narrative of the Genesis Creation story collapse into small droplets flowing down the Savior’s cheeks. God created in love, but by that same love, Christ wept.”

Fujimura told *Sojourners*, “Jesus’ tears are wasteful. He will, moments later, resurrect Lazarus, so why did he bother to ‘waste his time’ to weep with Mary? Because Jesus cares to give his tears to co-join with our suffering.”

For Fujimura, “art can be a way to tap into that mystery of Christ’s intervention,” whether in the presence of beauty or of utter devastation.

On Sept. 11, 2001, Fujimura was in a subway train headed to lower Manhattan when the first plane hit the World Trade Center. Subway service halted at that point, but the stopped train was close enough that the passengers could feel the first tower falling before the MTA sent the train several blocks north to safety. When Fujimura emerged both towers were gone; he lived very near the World Trade Center and did not know if his family was safe. They were



soon reunited, but like so many others, they were traumatized.

In his Judson University address, Fujimura spoke of what came next: “After 9/11, I had to train my imagination by painting over and over images of fire. I needed to transform haunting memories and images of destructive fire into the fire of sanctification.”

Part of his pain, Fujimura told *Sojourners*, was the realization that his children would be “Ground Zero children,” that they too would be always marked by seeing the 9/11 attack and its aftermath.

Jesus wept. Jesus weeps.

“I had to draw upon these tears of Christ,” he said. “I invoked them literally, by remembering them into my water-based, handmade paint, believing that in microscopic residues, Christ’s tears have multiplied into the very water that I am using.” Fujimura was commissioned by Crossway publishers to create art for *The Four Holy Gospels*, a special edition of the four canonical gospels in commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible in 2011. “The entire project—five major paintings, 89 illuminated chapter head



“GOD LOVES BEAUTY AND MERCY EXACTLY BECAUSE THEY STAND AS AN ANTIDOTE TO THE ‘SURVIVAL AT ALL COSTS’ MINDSET.”

letters, 148 pages of embellishments—was focused on painting the illuminations with Christ’s tears,” he said.

EXUBERANT CREATION AND OUTRAGEOUS BEAUTY

How is an art-shaped theology relevant to those of us who do not paint (much less paint with Christ’s tears), sculpt, or sing?

“Artists tend to be ‘border-stalkers,’” according to Fujimura, “traversing often marginalized and dangerous territories.” They may move on the fringes of “respectable” society or move between very differ-

ent institutions. Because they are willing to see beyond the norms and strictures of a given community or subculture, they can, Fujimura writes, “take in the vista of the wider pastures of culture.” He believes non-artists can learn to do this as well—retrain their imaginations to break boundaries and make new connections. For Christians this may mean trusting that the Holy Spirit is moving not just through our actions or intellect but through our intuition and imagination.

Fujimura notes that “since the Industrial Revolution, how we view the world, how we educate, and how we value ourselves have been all about purposeful efficiency.” Yet God, he insists, is more concerned with exuberant creation and outrageous beauty than with “usefulness” and metrics. (One could note that neither Jesus nor the prophets were especially concerned about pragmatism.)

“The church needs to become a maker of the new again,” he said. That will require artists and others ready to let their imaginations roam free. ✱

Julie Polter is managing editor of *Sojourners* magazine.

“GO TELL JOHN”

Illustrations by
Dohee Kwon



**What “Lady Wisdom” teaches
about the mission of Jesus—and
what that means for us today.
A Bible study on Matthew 11.**

**By
Reta
Halteman
Finger**

I was called “John the Baptist” because of that great revival movement we had down by the Jordan River. We were all so hopeful then, especially after my cousin Jesus showed up. I suspected he was *The One* to save our people, even after he asked me to baptize him. But when I heard that heavenly voice announcing, “This is my Son,” I knew. Judgment was coming! Jesus would know how to separate the wheat from the chaff and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire (Matthew 3:11-17)!

I was on a roll. We Jews would live by Yahweh’s law, Rome’s yoke would be cast off, and everything would change. I kept preaching and baptizing, and I even chastised Herod Antipas for his unlawful marriage (Mark 6:17-18), confident he was part of the “chaff.” Jesus was our Messiah, the Anointed One of Israel—and I had been his forerunner (Matthew 3:2-3). Yet here I am—chained to a wall in Herod’s dreary prison cell. What went wrong?

I assumed Jesus would gather and train disciples to prepare for a revolution. But rumors from my own disciples tell me this is not happening. He’s sending them out on missions to Jews, but not as I expected. They don’t even carry a backpack or a staff. Their only weapon is against physical diseases. And their promised rewards are arrests, floggings, and trials (Matthew 10:1-25). This sounds like a parody of what I was hoping for! Jesus acts more like a teacher and healer—even a prophet—but not like a king, not like an anointed Messiah!

When a few of my faithful disciples brought me food, I was feeling so disillusioned that I sent them to search for Jesus and ask him one simple question: “Are you the one who is to come—or are we to wait for another?” (Matthew 11:3). What will he say?

AN ALTERNATIVE PATH

Jesus didn’t waste words. “Go and tell John what you hear and see,” he replies. “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And

blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me” (Matthew 11:4-6).

John’s disciples leave to report back to him, and that’s the end of the exchange. Jesus isn’t threatened by John fearing he might be the wrong person for the job. Instead, he challenges John’s messianic expectations and describes an alternate path for “the one who is to come”—universal health care and the prospect of a better life for the common people (Matthew 11:4-5).

I confess I never paid much attention to this pericope about Jesus and John in Matthew 11:2-19 until I was asked to write a column on it for a Sunday school curriculum. The lessons were on wisdom, and this text was chosen because it ends with a pithy and rather puzzling comment by Jesus: “Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds” (verse 19). What can that mean?

Another interpretive hurdle is that this text demands a larger literary and historical context. So, hang in there with me for a few background paragraphs.

THE ANOINTED ONE AND “WOMAN WISDOM”

John’s expectation of “the one who is to come” refers to the Messiah, a Hebrew term meaning “the anointed one,” or the legitimate king of Israel. Later, during the centuries after the return from exile when there was no king on the throne, “Messiah” meant a coming descendant of King David who would restore the kingship. The Greek term is *Christos* (“anointed”).

When John baptized Jesus (Matthew 3:13-17), he realized that, unlike the others he was baptizing, this act was not for repentance but to anoint Jesus for his messianic

calling. Ever since then, John had pinned his hopes on Jesus as the promised Davidic king of Israel. To John, the Herods were only evil client-kings subject to Rome. Therefore, Roman rule of Israel must be overthrown.

Another figure from the Hebrew Bible and Apocrypha unexpectedly climaxes this passage—Woman Wisdom. In the gendered languages of Hebrew and Greek, “wisdom” is always feminine, so *hokmah* (Hebrew) and *sophia* (Greek) are typically personified as a woman. In the book of Proverbs, she is the first of Yahweh’s creation, who then partnered with him to co-create the earth and the heavens (8:22-31). The actions of Lady Hokmah are often contrasted with those of her opponent, Dame Folly.

Two Greek intertestamental books—Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach—also center around Lady Wisdom. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s book *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet* opened my eyes to the way Jesus identifies himself with Sophia throughout the gospels. (For example, in Matthew 11:28-30 we find the famous text “Come to me, all you who labor,” which derives directly from Sophia’s speeches in Sirach.)

MORE THAN A PROPHET

As John’s disciples leave in verse 7, we find Jesus surrounded by crowds. They evidently overheard his words to John’s disciples, so Jesus preaches a mini sermon on John. He does not treat John as a political rival or disparage his pointed question. Since the listeners revere John as a prophet (Matthew 11:7-9), Jesus affirms



“JESUS IDENTIFIES HIMSELF WITH SOPHIA THROUGHOUT THE GOSPELS.”

him as even more than a prophet; he is the messenger prophesied in Malachi 3:1 “who will prepare your way before you” (Matthew 11:10). John is Elijah chastising Herod, just as the first Elijah prophesied against King Ahab (Matthew 11:11-15; 1 Kings 17-19; Malachi 4:5).

Jesus is more critical of the crowds around him than he is of John. Although he and John have opposite lifestyles, they both come from God. John is ascetic, but Jesus will eat with anybody. Yet neither approach pleases this generation, laments Jesus (verses 16-19). They are like stubborn children who won’t cooperate to sing together either happy or sad songs. “In this way,” comments Mark Allan Powell, “Jesus castigates not only the powerful people who have attacked John and opposed him, but the common people as well.” And yet ...

YET WISDOM IS VINDICATED BY HER DEEDS!

The context makes clear that Jesus sees himself and John as representatives of Woman Wisdom, enabling them to accomplish their missions. Wisdom’s deeds in Jesus’ political platform are clear: a healing, teaching, organizing ministry among the poorest citizens of Galilee (Matthew 11:4-6). But how far can an anointed messiah get if he focuses on those at the bottom of the socio-economic pecking order? No wonder John was losing hope for a revolution.

Times were tough for ordinary Israelites in the first century. The Romans ruled a mighty empire and controlled conquered peoples through armies and high taxes. Failure to pay was viewed as rebellion against Rome. Ninety percent of Israelites were peasants living off the land. When taxes (up to 70 percent of income) were not paid, the upper classes took peasants’ land, reducing them to sharecroppers or slave labor for roadbuilding. Mostly illiterate, peasants survived at a subsistence level. The ill and disabled who could not work would beg—or die.

How might Sophia advise Jesus in such a dire situation? What did Jesus mean

when he told John that “the poor have good news brought to them”? (11:5).

We glimpse an answer to this in the preceding chapter where Jesus sends out his 12 disciples to duplicate his own mission throughout the small towns and villages of Galilee. As they walk from village to village, they carry nothing with them, no money or food or protection (Matthew 10:9-14). They will depend on reciprocal sharing: food and lodging in exchange for healing and introducing the coming reign of Yahweh.

In *Excavating Jesus*, John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed explain that good news to the poor involves communal sharing of food instead of private hoarding. Jesus realistically promises plenty of hardship and persecutions, but with shared resources—even “a cup of cold water”—no one will lose their reward (10:40-42). Good news means that Yahweh cares for the least among them; “even the hairs of your head are all counted,” and not a sparrow falls unnoticed (10:26-32).

THE SECRET MESSIAH

Paging through Matthew’s gospel, I realized that Jesus’s political wisdom also included secrecy. So far, he has not announced his identity, and no character has called him a messiah. It was too dangerous. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus writes of various would-be messiahs during this time who got nowhere. Rome would never tolerate a political challenge. Jesus can draw crowds only as a healer and prophet.

But in Matthew 16:13-20, Jesus takes his disciples to a private place in northern Israel and pops the question: “Who do people say I am?” The disciples rightly name what I had observed: “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets,” (16:14). It’s only when Jesus pushes harder—“Who do you say that I am?”—that Peter names Jesus “Messiah.” Even so, the concept of messiah-as-king is downplayed. Messiah Jesus will not build his *kingdom* on Peter’s

statement, but a *church*, an *ekklesia*, a non-military communal gathering.

When the meeting is over in verse 20, Jesus “sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.” He is wise enough to know that as soon as this becomes public in Jerusalem, he will pay for it with great suffering (verses 21 and following).

THE WISDOM OF THE MESSIAH, THEN AND NOW

Will Jesus’ ancient wisdom work today when so much has changed since then? At that time, neither capitalism nor socialism existed. Chattel slavery enabled kingdoms and great empires to rise. The Roman emperor was considered *divi filius*—son of a god. Social class structure was rigid, and the poor remained at or below subsistence, no matter how hard they worked.

In that world, Jesus declared that Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds as he defined them in Matthew 11:5. First, she desires universal health care. Second, she has good news for the poor—she can help create a shared community where everyone’s basic needs are met.

But despite enormous economic, political, scientific, and technological advances since then, many millions of people still lack the same things: access to affordable health care and a decent living standard. The gap between rich and poor in America grows wider every year. Can disciples of Jesus today vindicate Woman Wisdom by imitating Jesus’ methods?

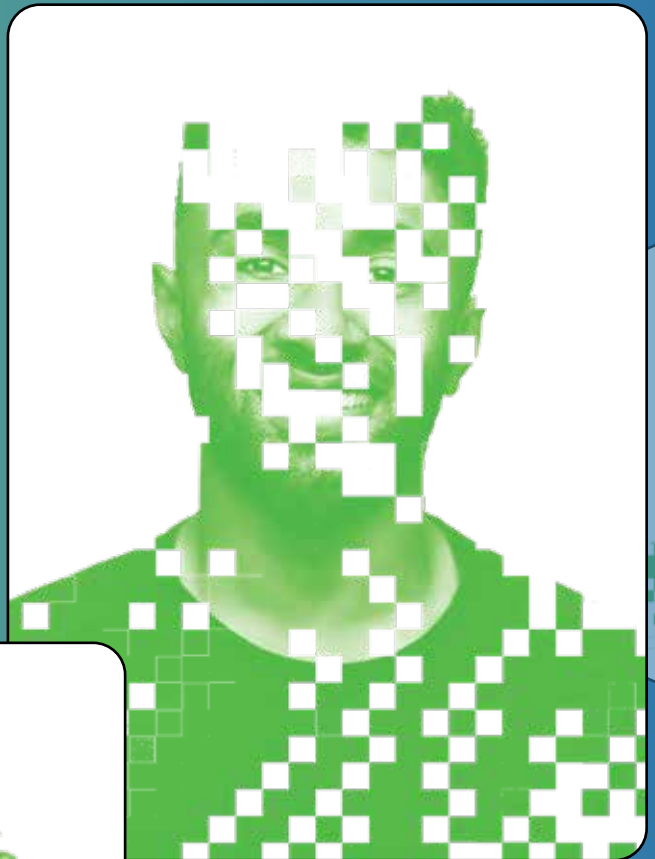
As I wrote columns about biblical texts on Woman Wisdom last summer, I often despaired of finding her in my own world. A poorly managed pandemic has brought suffering, death, and growing economic inequality. Our warming climate increased disasters of wind, fire, and water. Racial tragedies produced a stronger Black Lives Matter movement, but will it last? A presidential campaign increased our political polarization. If there was ever a time for world and national leaders to call upon Lady Wisdom, it’s now! Yet why does Dame Folly so often prevail?

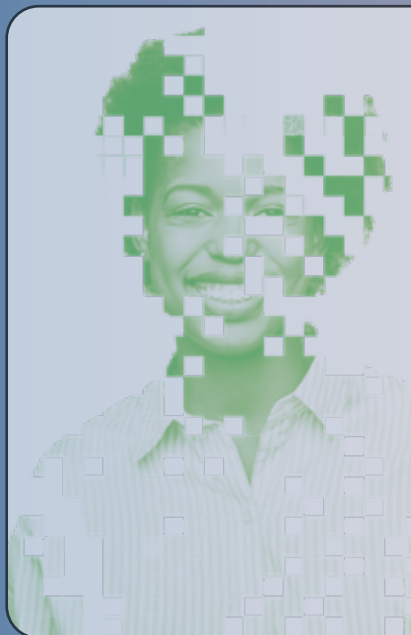
Sadly, Christians also polarize when political ideology trumps theology. “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” How did Jesus answer? Should his mission be ours too? ♦

Reta Halteman Finger, author of *Creating a Scene in Corinth*, is a New Testament scholar and a *Sojourners* contributing editor.

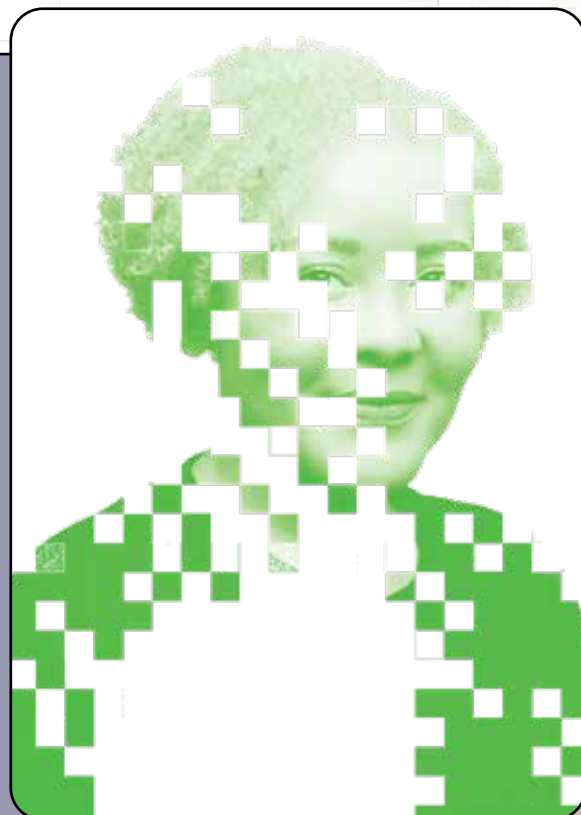
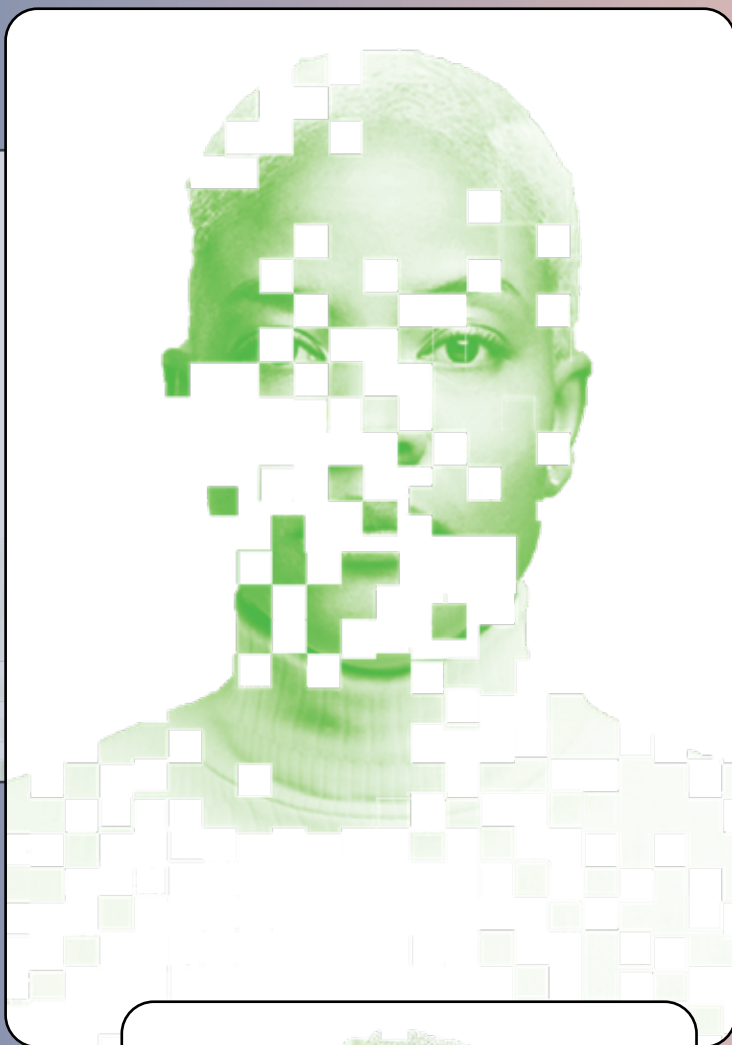


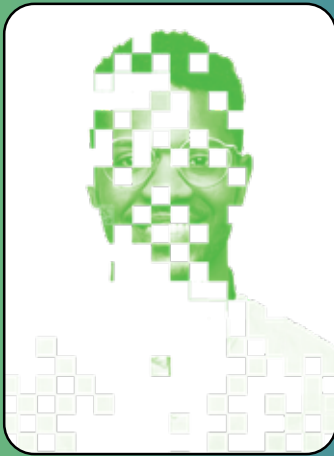
**“SO WHAT
IS IT THEY’RE
ASKING YOU
TO DO?”**





Civil rights activist Ruby Sales sees technology devaluing us and erasing our history. But she believes in young people of faith's ability to promote God's better vision of us.





If asked “What era would you time travel to if you could?”

many young Black and brown and Indigenous people would answer in a flash, “None of them.” Why? We’re too aware of the past and what it means for us today—we tweet about the results of American slavery and can break news of the latest injustice to emerge from centuries-long hatred of nonwhite skin faster than MSNBC. We feel the negative effects of history enough each day to not want to go back there.

But maybe we should. If all we see of ourselves on TV and social media is us sick, oppressed, or dead, what other understanding of ourselves do we miss? How can we remember that we are greater than the damage done—that our history holds more than that and so might our present?

Ruby Sales, founder and director of the SpiritHouse Project, helps young people invested in faith and social justice see themselves through the lens of their divine wealth and boundless potential rather than through eyes dimmed by media and versions of history shaped by white supremacy. Sales, who by age 17 was a Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee member registering people to vote in her home state of Alabama, has a Master of Divinity degree from the Episcopal Divinity School and is a preacher, speaker, and intergenerational mentor on racial, economic, and social justice. I spoke with her in December by phone.

—Da’Shawn Mosley

Da'Shawn Mosley: I watched a YouTube video of you speaking in 2015 at St. Albans Episcopal Church in D.C. and was struck by what you said about today's youth: that the most recent generations have incredible insight but haven't lived enough to have hindsight.

Ruby Sales: Now that I'm working with young folks in my fellowship program and have had some time to weigh how things have changed from the '90s to the 2000s, I think young people lack insight also. When you have been raised in a technological age, when history is no longer lived experience but is created on social media and reproduced through technology, I think that long-term memory is affected, as well as the ability to empathize and connect with human suffering. There is a difference between being able to theorize about human suffering and being able to feel it. All of these are challenges faced by generations raised in a technocracy—the decimation of history, of who we are as a people.

Mosley: Yes. I see that in my own media consumption. I can watch all the buzzy, must-see, "life-changing" television shows and movies and more often than not retain almost none of it. What else do you sense that social justice-minded people and people of faith in general are not picking up or fighting with as much vigor as we could be?

Sales: The social gospel of meaninglessness. We are stuck in it and it does not deal with the issues that are part of the social, political landscape of the 21st century. What does it mean to exist in a militarized state designed to protect the interests of a global elite and decimate our ability to resist and even think critically about the world that we live in? Where is God in all of this? Where is hope and meaning in a life of such insurmountable greed and social malformation? I don't see a social gospel that gives us the good news. Instead, I still hear people calling people marginalized. Yes, you can tell me that I might be marginalized because of the state, but the good news is that I am significant and I am relevant, to my partners, to my family, to my community, and to God. We need a social, spiritual gospel that doesn't consider us just in relation to the project of democracy but as God's creation, that raises people up from being disposable to being essential.

Mosley: When we first spoke, you asked me about my background. I said I come from a low-income family and you corrected me. You told me that I don't have a low-income family, I have a family that has a low income—that there's a difference.

Sales: You described yourself in terms of your lack of money, your deficit. You totally diminished yourself, the complexities of your family, to one word. The social gospel we need is the same good news that Jesus gave in first-century Nazorean culture, that he was raising people up who had been considered disposable, a healing that enabled them to touch their full capacities as human beings and claim their power and not see themselves through the eyes of the empire. I think that many young Black folks, because their associations of the Lord are from the white folks, they tend to see themselves through the white gaze.

Another thing I've discovered, analyzing the values that young people ingest through TikTok and Instagram: How is it that you measure a person's worth? By their money, by their proximity to celebrities, by the fact that this video went viral or the number of followers that they have or the number of likes that they get? And all of those things do not reinforce the efficacy of our human lives. It says that a person's worth is measured by these material realities and that anyone who does not have these things are losers. That means that young Black people—because they have bought into the mythology that all Black people are poor—haven't made the connection: What in the hell have 111 historical Black colleges such as Meharry, Morehouse, Howard Law School, and Howard Medical School been doing for 100 years? Producing a Black middle class, a Black bourgeoisie. And because they have bought into the white gaze that all Black people are poor, there is a subtle contempt that many young Black folks have for other Black people who are economically dispossessed, and for themselves.

Mosley: That is frightening, that even in this "liberated space" we are still turning against ourselves.

Sales: The technocrats have managed to control information in society, to manufacture a false definition of who matters and who doesn't, and often the variables that say who matters are values that underscore whiteness and capitalism and patriarchy and heterosexism.

Mosley: Your mention of heterosexism reminds me of the story you told me about Lucy Slowe, dean of women in the early days of Howard, whom the school's community rose up to protect when her job was threatened because of her queerness.

Sales: Yes, she represented a community project where, given the onslaught and viciousness of segregation and white supremacy, Black people needed all hands on deck, the skills of anybody who could advance the race, educate the children, and preserve our right to liberty. What I was saying is that this whole notion that the Black community is homophobic is to give us what belongs to white people. Because we couldn't even vote, so how the hell could we be heterosexist? Heterosexism is at the heart of that system. Heterosexism means the ability to shape the system.

Mosley: Yes. My faith journey has always struggled because of the narrative pitting me against other Black people of faith, saying, "They're homophobic. They're not supportive of you."

Sales: That's really insidious, because those very same people don't say that you should vet all white people for their racism, including them, do they? They do not tell you to stop breaking bread [with them].

Mosley: That's true.

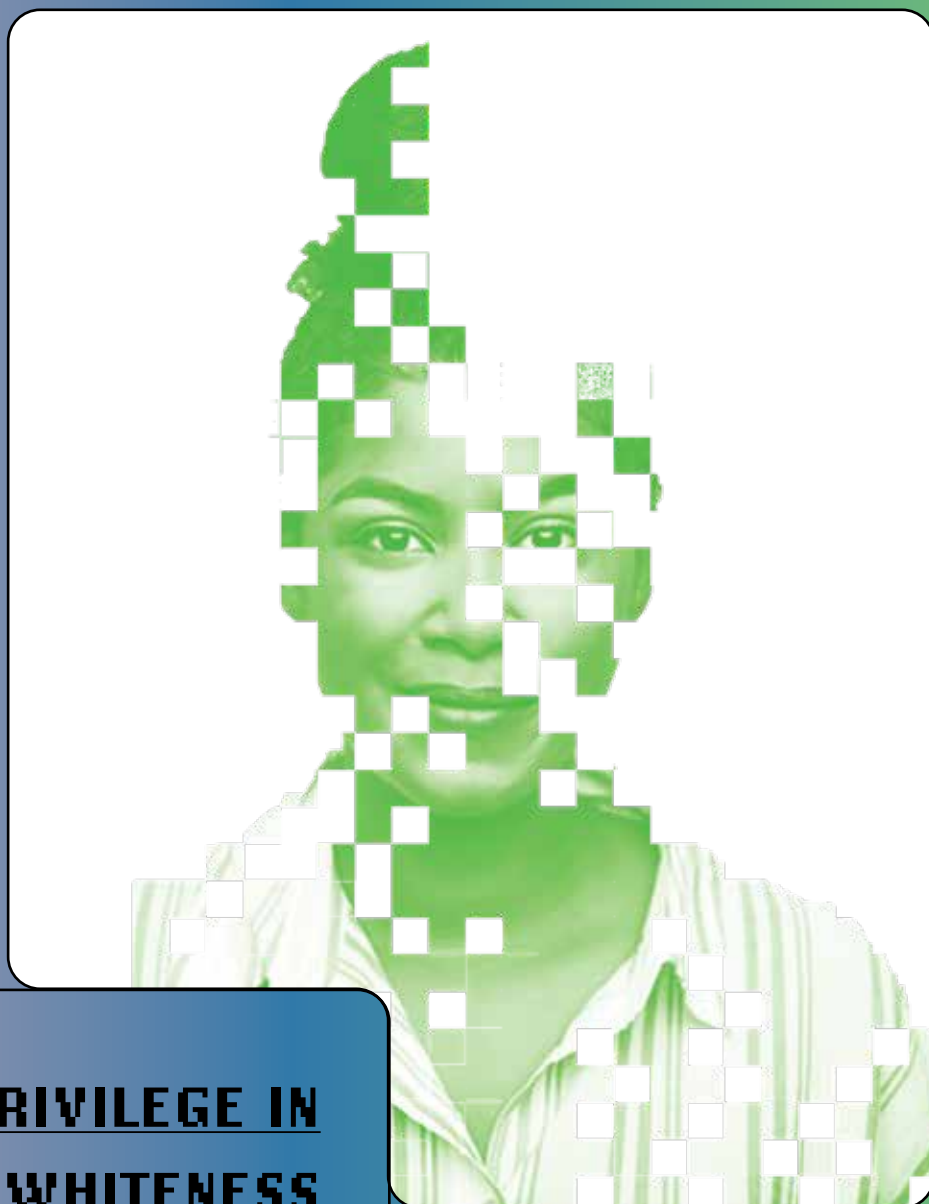
Sales: So what is it that they're asking you to do? To become a eunuch who is only defined by their sexual relationship and to not have the same judgment against the people who violate your body, who lynch you, who dehumanize you, who assault you because of your Blackness? What makes your sexuality more important than your Blackness?

Young Black people, because they don't know the history, they begin to believe that their community doesn't love them. They don't remember that all the heterosexism that gets to be policy in this country is not shaped by what Black people feel, because people in power don't give a shit what we feel.

Mosley: What do we young people of faith in this current social justice movement need to do to stand up and confront all this?

Sales: Ask the question, "What is faith?" Where do you place your faith? I believe that young people place their faith in computers and in technology, and tech-

THERE IS NO PRIVILEGE IN
A CULTURE OF WHITENESS
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AND YOUR ETHNICITY.



nology becomes God. What altar do you bow down to and worship? What does it mean to live in a white supremacist society where white skin is a fetish that we are all asked to idolize? And how do we begin to see ourselves outside of that construct? What does it mean to look at oneself through the gaze of one's own history? And what does it mean to understand, as Ralph Ellison has pointed out to us, that we are more than what white people make of us: We are also what we make of ourselves. I believe that young Black people in communities of faith, as well as young brown and white people, must begin to ask, What is it that their communities have made of themselves as well as other people?

I would also say, for God's sake, stop talking about "community organizers," because that language assumes that communities you are going to work with are chaotic and you're bringing your skills to organize them. Usually you're talking about Black and brown communities, which perpetuates Black people being uncivilized and remade by white people.

So we must begin to interrogate our assumptions about each other and the world that we live in, and ask, "What can I do to cleanse myself of the marks of whiteness?" I worry about young Black people who are always performing suffering for white people in the public sphere and say white folks don't love them, and waste all their energy. I don't get that.

Mosley: I had a conversation about this recently with one of my friends who's also a fiction writer, about the pressures that get placed upon Black and brown and LGBTQ+ artists to write from a position of squalor.

Sales: What I don't understand, Da'Shawn, is why you separate out Black LGBTQ people from their Blackness? Why can't you say that in one breath? That's really problematic. There is no monolithic queer person. That's a mythology. That's like saying there's a monolithic white person and that class doesn't exist. That's like saying all LGBTQ people live the same lives and that class doesn't exist for them, or race.

Mosley: I think I've been conditioned to do that because for myself and the other young people I know, TikTok and Twitter and all these other means sort us out through algorithms and demographics, and we have also filtered ourselves into groups. So even when we are arguing with bigots, saying,

"You're mythologizing us and abstracting us," we do the same to each other. We have a false understanding that there is a unified narrative, and you're right, there isn't one. Nuance is something that the young people I know, me included, struggle with.

Sales: Well, this is what I've discovered with the fellows that I'm teaching this year: the inability to say "Black." They can say "capitalism," they can name class, they can talk about LGBTQ oppression, but it is very hard for them to name themselves as Black. It's almost like there's a fear.

Mosley: I can see that.

Sales: But why is that? Explain that to me.

Mosley: I think there's still an internal hatred being drilled into us. For myself, it's not something I'm conscious of, but when I sit and really examine myself, I realize that, even in this social justice movement where I'm considered woke, I find myself still having to actively remove from myself these white narratives.

Sales: Where do you all get your impression of Black people from?

Mosley: We're getting it through TV and social media. I think there's no thought to history unless it's packaged in a Netflix series.

Sales: Well, you can never be free when you allow your story and your history to be erased and you allow white men to be gods who reproduce and re-create you in the images that they want you to be, rather than the images you are. That's what whiteness is. Whiteness is idolatry. It's white men who want to be equal with God to determine who we are.

Mosley: I've never thought, as an artist, about what it would look like to write a narrative that does not come out of my dearth, doesn't come out of what I lack or what my family lacks, but turns it around and says, "Look at what we have."

Sales: See, that's the thing that makes white people fear us so much, because we have endured and navigated the most heinous modes of oppression. It is that soul force that allowed Black children to face German Shepherds who clawed at their throats during the Southern freedom movement. It was that soul force that allowed us to stand up against charging

horses and bombs and guns and all sorts of weapons. It's articulately resistant.

Mosley: I could cry right now, because you're fleshing out for me what I've heard Toni Morrison say: that it's such a waste of breath for us to continually quarrel with whiteness over why we matter. That we would forever be proving that and never doing the real work we were called to do, never talking about ourselves the way we need to be talked about.

Sales: They've become our significant others. They've become the inhabitants of our dreams, the inhabitants of our frame of reference, the inhabitants and shapers of our souls. If you believe white people hate us because we're unworthy, or they believe we're unworthy and inferior, you begin to feel that way. You have to understand that they fear and hate us because of our ability to make a way out of no way. But that's not what young Black people see. Y'all see deficit. Y'all see deficiency.

I'm giving you this time because I try to encourage young Black artists and writers and historians to begin to look at the world and rediscover themselves through this Black gaze. And to write something, Da'Shawn, where you're no longer in the white gaze. You see, when Black people perform suffering—when we talk about how we have suffered and all of the bad things that we are—that makes white people feel good about being white and it reaffirms their superiority and their power to create Black pain, and that makes them powerful. They become gods who have the power over our happiness, and have the ability to determine our sitting down and our getting up.

Mosley: That makes so much sense. We talk about their privilege, and in doing that we talk about how underprivileged we are and that raises them up even higher.

Sales: What we must say to white people, quite honestly and lovingly, is there is no privilege in a culture of whiteness that requires you to massacre your identity and reduce your life to simply white skin and disconnect yourself from your gender, your sexuality, your class, and your ethnicity. That's called death. That's a death culture. There's no privilege in living through that. You may have rights that we don't have—that's different. But to say there's privilege in being white: That's an affirmation of the social perversity that comes along with whiteness. ✪

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DIRECTOR KIRSTEN KELLY AND REV. TAWANA DAVIS HELP FAITH LEADERS ADDRESS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE.



A

As this pandemic rages on and people are isolated in their homes with their intimate

partners, many are more vulnerable than ever to violence. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately 1 in 4 women and nearly 1 in 10 men experience sexual violence, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner during their lifetime. In addition, an average of 24 people per minute are victims

Documentary

of rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner in the United States—more than 12 million women and men during a single year.

Odyssey Impact, an interfaith nonprofit that addresses social issues through storytelling and media, hopes to change this with a four-part *Healing the Healers* video series, directed by Kirsten Kelly, that features interfaith peer-to-peer conversations



Participants in the *Healing the Healers* conversations include (clockwise from upper left) Rev. Tawana Davis, Rev. Bonita Chase Darby, Rev. Regina C. Groff, Davis, and Imam Mohamed Magid.

about domestic violence. It is scheduled for a January 2021 release on healingthehealers.org.

This is the second series under the *Healing the Healers* name. The first was a five-part video series that grew out of a pastor's efforts in Newtown, Conn., to deal with the aftereffects of the Sandy Hook school massacre; it includes conversations with clergy, social workers, and first responders who have been on the front lines as different communities have dealt with traumatic events. The second *Healing the Healers* series on domestic violence likewise addresses a crisis by modeling honest conversation about a difficult topic across faith lines.

"It's of vital importance that these conversations are happening now, because of the rise in domestic violence cases," says Kelly. "This is an issue that no one talks about because of the shame, because of the stigma. Our faith communities need to be leading on this issue and we're giving them a tool with this series to spread awareness and education."

Rev. Tawana Davis leads discussions in the new series. She was in a seminary class on pastoral care when she recognized that she was a victim of domestic violence.

"I was 38 when I escaped from my domestic violence relationship," says Davis. "That's when I fell in love with myself." She discovered that she didn't need to carry

around the shame and the blame, and that telling her story was the single most powerful thing she could do to build awareness and create change. At that point she began her own path toward healing and is now an advocate for other survivors and helps faith communities learn how they can be part of ending violence.

Kelly and Davis believe faith communities can learn to better support those affected by intimate partner violence by speaking out and taking a stand. But they need tools.

"Pastors and faith community leaders aren't equipped to deal with this themselves," says Davis, "so we want to give them a way to put language around it, and to help build a network of resources so that when domestic violence cases come up, they have a way to offer significant help and healing. We need to dismantle the current system of silence and shame, then build a system of healing."

One of the most powerful conversations in this series is between Davis and Imam Mohamed Magid, who leads on this issue for Islamic communities. When asked how he handles cases of intimate partner violence within his own community, he says that the victims must always be believed and that communities must dismantle the silence. Magid and Davis agree that an antidote to this violence is storytelling and conversation—creating the space to speak fears and suffering out loud and listen to one another.

"Violence is so deeply rooted in our American culture," says Davis. "We can either do nothing, because of this nation's history, or we can do something. If everyone does something, if every pastor and faith leader learns about this and speaks about it in their communities, then these things can be addressed."

"This is not a situation," says Kelly, "where we don't know the answers. We must create communities of trust and knowledge so that people can safely come forward, tell their stories, and seek healing."

Healing the Healers models this work beautifully. ✱

**WE NEED TO
DISMANTLE THE
CURRENT SYSTEM
OF SILENCE AND
SHAME.**

Stephanie Sandberg is an assistant professor of theater and film studies at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Va., and co-director of the documentary *Intimate Violence* (intimateviolencefilm.com).



HEART AND HARD TIMES

By Da'Shawn Mosley

A

A genuine heart can overcome many a fault in the television landscape. I don't just mean from a plot perspective, in which a character's good nature helps them exit a situation their good nature got them into in the first place. But also from the perspective of capturing viewers' attention—protagonists whose warmth we feel through the screen in a way that makes us forget a show's turnoffs: occasional weak jokes, predictable storytelling, trite dialogue—all of which the Netflix show *Gentefied* contains.

And yet *Gentefied*, a half-hour comedy with a title that plays on the words *gente* (Spanish for “people”) and *gentrified*, has quickly become a favorite. The Mexican American Morales family at its center are hilarious and relatable. Casimiro (or “Pop,” as his grandkids call him), owner of a taco restaurant in LA’s Boyle Heights neighborhood, struggles to keep his establishment open as he falls further behind on its rent and gentrification makes the neighborhood less and less familiar. Meanwhile, Casimiro’s granddaughter Ana seeks to become a successful artist; grandson Chris, a trained-in-Paris chef; and other-grandson Erik, a dependable dad. Haunting their family home are Chris’ financially stable yet estranged dad and memories of Pop’s late wife. In these tough situations full of grief (Donald Trump’s xenophobic presidency does not help), *Gentefied*’s creators Linda Yvette Chávez and Marvin Lemus highlight the humor and love of the Morales family journey.

In 2020, there was a backlash when actor John Leguizamo tweeted about the Primetime Emmy Awards

not recognizing Latino members of the industry. People called him and others out for excluding from the conversation the dark-skinned Afro-Latino actor Jharrel Jerome, a 2019 Emmy winner for his performance in Ava DuVernay’s miniseries *When They See Us*. In *Gentefied*, we see dark-skinned Afro-Latina actress Julissa Calderon play Ana’s activist girlfriend, Yessika, and thus increase television’s still-limited diversity of representation in more ways than one. Despite their ups and downs, Ana and Yessika have the show’s sturdiest romantic relationship.

Thankfully, *Gentefied* has been renewed for a second season and is now one of the few active shows on broadcast, cable, or streaming with a Latinx cast. It may be heavy-handed in how it highlights social justice concerns, but perhaps we need that push right now. In a time of nationwide health and economic crisis and millions threatened with eviction while they’re supposed to quarantine, it’s our responsibility to help all God’s children, all those beating hearts, stay strong and overcome. ✪

Da'Shawn Mosley is associate editor of *Sojourners*.

From *Gentefied*

LOVE, HOME, AND LONGING

Named after the hardy Korean herb, *Minari* follows a multigenerational Korean American family as they relocate to rural Arkansas to pursue the elusive “American Dream.” Lee Isaac Chung’s film is a stunning, visceral portrayal of creating roots of one’s own.

A24 Films



Called to Ministry

In *Out in the Pulpit: The Lived Experiences of Lesbian Clergy in Four Protestant Mainline Denominations*, Pamela Pater-Ennis uses theological and social work frameworks to highlight lesbian clergy, following 13 women as they reconcile their Christianity, gender, and sexuality.

LifeRich Publishing



The Clouds Rise

Set in post-World War II Japan, Asha Lemmie’s debut novel *Fifty Words for Rain* introduces Nori, the child of a Japanese aristocrat and African American GI. Encompassing many years, this story of lineage and transfiguration depicts the cost of estrangement—and belonging.

Dutton

A COMMON ENEMY

By
Danny Duncan
Collum



Eyes & Ears

In August 2019, *The New York Times* published a special edition of its magazine, with an accompanying podcast, to note the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first Africans in the Virginia colony. They called the total work “The 1619 Project.” As a *Times* blurb for the project put it, “American slavery began 400 years ago this month. This is referred to as the country’s original sin, but it is more than that: It is the country’s true origin.”

Almost a year later, “The 1619 Project” became a school history curriculum, and in the waning days of his presidential administration Donald Trump pushed back with plans for a “1776 Commission” to promote “patriotic education” and counter the claim that “America is a wicked and racist nation.”

It’s not surprising that a nation in which everyone has a right to their own facts may end up with two foundings. However, while those who emphasize the centrality of African enslavement in the American story are certainly closer to the truth, both the champions of 1619 and 1776 are missing something crucial. For all the things it got right, “The 1619 Project” over-simplified the origins of the U.S. slave system. As the eminent African American historian Nell Irvin Painter wrote in *The Guardian*, “People were not enslaved in Virginia in 1619, they were indentured. The [first] Africans were sold

THEY BEGAN PUTTING IN PLACE THE LEGAL BASIS TO ENSLAVE AFRICANS FOR LIFE AND PLACATE THE DISCONTENT OF POOR WHITES.

and bought as ‘servants’ for a term of years, and they joined a population consisting largely of European indentured servants, mainly poor people from the British Isles.”

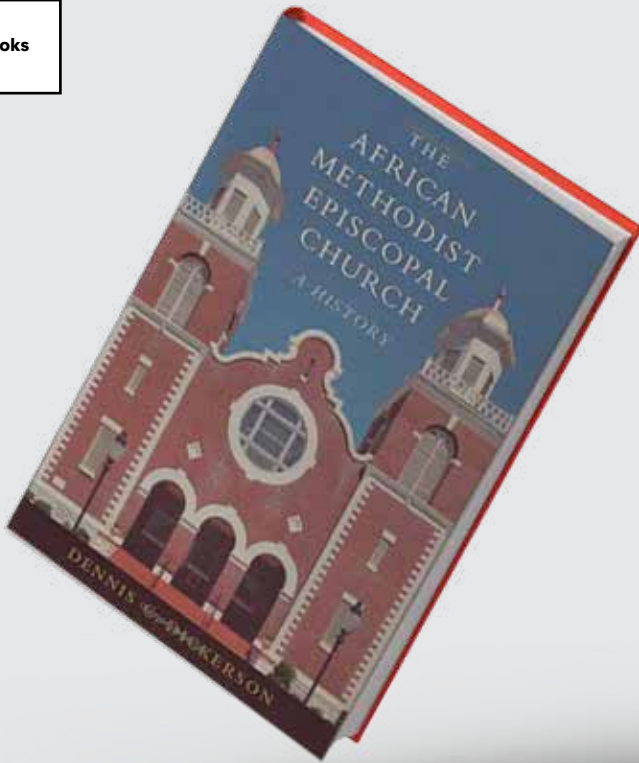
For the next few decades, the African and English indentured servants lived and worked side by side. They shared a common plight, a common life, and a common enemy. They socialized together, they sometimes intermarried, and in 1676 they rebelled together. Bacon’s Rebellion (named for its leader, Nathaniel Bacon) began as a movement of frontiersmen demanding more support in back and forth raids between them and local Indigenous people. But, after Bacon promised freedom to any servant who joined him, the movement snowballed into an uprising of the colony’s Black and white have-nots against the wealthy landowners. It was only a moment, but in that moment we can, in history’s rearview mirror, catch a glimpse of the multiracial democratic commonwealth that might have been—the possibility of which struck terror in the hearts of Virginia’s plantation-owning elite.

Eventually, Nathaniel Bacon died of dysentery, and British troops arrived to suppress the remaining rebels. When order was restored, the colonial rulers acted to make sure nothing like Bacon’s Rebellion would ever happen again. They began putting in place the legal basis to enslave Africans for life and placate the discontent of poor whites. In the years to come, the ideology of white supremacy would evolve to justify these new arrangements.

So the very concept of race in America began as a way to divide the working class and ensure the domination of the wealthy. That is still what it’s for today, and 1676 explains it all. ✖

Danny Duncan Collum teaches writing at Kentucky State University in Frankfort. He is the author of the novel *White Boy*.

Books



ARCHIVES, ACTIVISTS, AND ALTARS

The African Methodist
Episcopal Church:
A History,
by Dennis C. Dickerson

Cambridge University Press

Dennis C. Dickerson brings two competencies to the writing of this history. One is secular: He is a historian at Vanderbilt University, specializing in African American religious history, labor history, and the U.S. civil rights movement. The other is sacred: He is a retired general officer of the AME Church. In that capacity, he had access to the church's extensive archives and served in the church's leadership councils in Nashville, Tenn. With these gifts, Dickerson captures via superb research how the AME Church became a major social and denominational force in the construction of the African American religious experience—a narrative that includes the community's enduring struggles for racial freedom, equality, and uplift. Dickerson writes:

The AME Church, located throughout its history within the Atlantic World, faced the forces of subjugation, which fixed the status of its large colored constituencies. Though AME ministers and members were themselves vulnera-

A. PHILIP RANDOLPH, ROSA PARKS, KENNETH KAUNDA, AND MANY OTHERS BEGAN THEIR LIVES AS CHRISTIANS IN AME CHURCHES.

ble peoples, they focused on the dual tasks of developing and maintaining an independent religious body and confronting powerful national, political, and economic structures aimed at black subordination. While institutional governance was itself a liberation activity, it competed and, at times, undermined equally important efforts to defeat oppressive systems of slavery, segregation, colonialism, and apartheid. The history of the AME Church is a narrative about these tensions.

In seven lucidly written chapters, Dickerson writes about the men and women—people of enslaved African descent in North America and, later, on the African continent—who gave faith, hope, and love to the dispirited, downtrodden, and the disinherited. Among those was Richard Allen, a former slave from Delaware and a Methodist preacher who, barred from praying at the altar of a white church in 1794, would go on to lay the foundations of the AME Church and eventually be elected the denomination's first bishop. With keen insight and moving sensitivity, Dickerson locates Allen, his followers, and the AME Church within the abolitionist narrative and chronicles how the denomination became known as the

“freedom” church.

“Both the United States and South Africa, the principal loci of racially oppressive systems, became major venues of denominational development,” Dickerson writes. “Therefore, clergy and laity devised a range of strategies to oppose, undermine, and circumvent oppressive policies aimed at black subjugation on both sides of the Atlantic.”

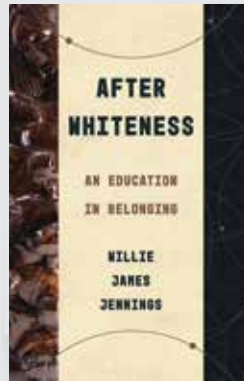
A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Rosa Parks of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Kenneth Kaunda of the Zambian African National Congress, and many others began their lives as Christians in AME churches. In southern Africa, the church developed health care facilities for HIV/AIDS patients. In writing this important book, Dickerson has made an impressive and comprehensive contribution to the African American, Atlantic, and religious histories. Readers can trust *The African Methodist Episcopal Church: A History* to be an authoritative resource. ♦

Lester P. Lee Jr. is a senior lecturer of history at Suffolk University in Boston.

TO THE MASTERS OF THEOLOGY

After Whiteness:
An Education in Belonging,
by Willie James Jennings

Eerdmans



W

When I was in divinity school, we had cliques. And what often separated these cliques, these little theological gaggles, if you will, was what each prized as the decisive foundation of Christian faith. For some it was scripture; for others, orthodox or anti-orthodox tradition; for still others, charismatic

revelation, or the experience of the marginalized, or some cocktail of all the aforementioned. Sometimes we said Christ united us, but then we'd wonder, with charity or suspicion, "Who is 'Christ' to them?" Isolated on our little islands of perpetual disagreement, we nonetheless seemed secure.

In *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, Willie James Jennings has written a love letter to theological institutions, warning against the pursuit of such security. Our knowledge of ourselves, our God, and our world comes to us creatures only in fragments, he writes, and it is in those fragments that we must always work together. Jennings weaves story and poetry to expose how the allure of "white self-sufficient masculinity" has tempted Western educational institutions, especially theological ones, to use knowledge and people to establish control in the face of fragments. Theological education may initially crack the foundations of budding ministers, but it often aims to form self-confident possessors of particular truths. This vision proceeds from whiteness, what Jennings calls "a way of being in the world that aspires to exhibit possession, mastery, and control of knowledge first, and of one's self second, and if possible of one's world." Such whiteness "strangles," he writes, "the possibilities of dense life together" for Christians.

"Dense life together"; communion; paying constant, full attention to one another; even "an assimilation that does not harm but heals"—these are the hopes Jennings pursues in this book. Such hopes cannot be achieved by mastering Christian virtue, nor by overlaying some tolerant democratic spirit upon the world as it is. Neither can "education as emancipatory weapon" prevail, as it draws its advocates into endless critique and exhausting isolation.

In his more academic book, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, Jennings hints that "the concept of reconciliation is not irretrievable," before clarifying how colonialism rendered Christianity incapable of imagining reconciliation.

I see *After Whiteness* as an attempt to retrieve the possibility of a kind of reconciliation—one far richer than we typically imagine, a union not first of races or cliques, but of all humanity and God. It depends upon institutions and persons removing their hermeneutical armor, accepting creaturely insecurity, and receiving God's gift of life in the fragments.

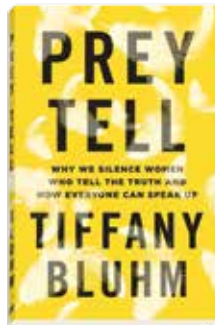
It is not just division that plagues our institutions, but domination. Jennings knows well how white Christianities continue to bind and bully. And yet for him, dominating or fleeing the dominators will not yield the divine life toward which Christians are called. Instead, theological education must forever "give witness to ... the desire of God to make embrace the vocation of creatures that have yielded to the Spirit." ♦

Ryan Stewart is a teacher in West Haven, Conn., and graduate of Yale Divinity School.

MORE THAN A SHRED OF POWER

An excerpt from *Prey Tell: Why We Silence Women Who Tell the Truth and How Everyone Can Speak Up*, by Tiffany Bluhm

Brazos Press



I heard him loud and clear and ran as quickly as my little legs could carry me through their field, across the street, and up my driveway, straight into my house, where I hid in my room. I was seven. The very next day at school, my friend said nothing of the encounter between her dad and me. She never spoke of it, and neither did I. I, as a young brown girl, was inferior, and that white man, forty years my senior, with his shiny black gun, was superior. I would not be convinced otherwise.

After I graduated from high school, my understanding of a woman's place in the world expanded as my grip to justice tightened, but I still held to this conscious, and subconscious, belief that if I held even a shred of power, it was because someone with privilege (in my case, white male privilege) had given it to me. Many of my pastors, bosses, teachers, and mentors, to their credit, were outrageously gracious, kind, and generous. To them I owe so much. They believed in women, married strong women, and gave me opportunities I would have never had otherwise; however, they still remained in charge of women. Many of them treated that power with the utmost respect; others abused it beyond what I could have ever imagined.

Like many other women, I've made excuses for the men in my world. *He didn't mean it like that. That wasn't his intent. He's a good guy. I'm sure he has my best interests at heart. He is the one God chose to lead me. He sees the whole picture. He knows change takes time. He means well, but boys will be boys.* I've made excuses until I couldn't. ❖

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SANS

By Divya Mehrish



I mispronounce my body as if
 the architecture of the spine
 were soft, as if this poem could
 start *here*,
 in the space between open lips,
 even though it resists a title.
 To be means to exist
 with a name. To be means
 to have a body worth defining.

Full of cold faith, a poem
 is an entity of quiet hunger,
 an origin story saturated
 with home.
 Half-woman, half-artist,
 I am creating the thing
 that has created me.

Divya Mehrish is from New York and a student at Stanford University.

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SOJOURNERS

TO LIVE IN GOD'S RENEWED WORLD

Scripture passages
are from the Revised
Common Lectionary,
Cycle B

By Isaac S. Villegas



Living the Word

The Christian life returns again and again to prayer. We pray by ourselves, and we pray with others. Worship draws us to the scriptures, with the psalter at the center of the Bible, which

bears witness to the back-and-forth, the disagreement and commitment, the frustration and intimacy, of God's communication with God's people—a textual record of conversations across the ages.

With the guidance of these holy words, prayer transfigures us with divine communion, our lives caught up in the life of God. We find ourselves with the disciples when Jesus takes them up the mountain, where “he was transfigured before them” (Mark 9:2). We are Jesus’ companions. He welcomes us into a life of prayer, which is our union with God.

In *After the Spirit*, theologian Eugene Rogers uses the traditional language of church doctrine to describe this process of deification. “The Holy Spirit incorporates human prayer into the prayer of the Son to the Father.” In the biblical scene, we are standing there with Jesus on the mountain as the thick presence of heaven descends on him like a cloud (Mark 9:7). “Prayer is a transfiguration of human beings,” Rogers explains. This story is about our participation in the trinitarian life of God. The Bible passages this month lead us from Epiphany to Lent, with Transfiguration Sunday as our transition from one season to the next. During Lent we open ourselves to how the light of Epiphany’s revelations about God exposes sin’s insidious powers in our lives and in the world.

Isaac S. Villegas is pastor of Chapel Hill (N.C.) Mennonite Fellowship and president of the governing board of the North Carolina Council of Churches.

GOD'S LAW IS NOT IN COMPETITION WITH GOD'S LOVE.

FEBRUARY 7

CREATURELY NEIGHBORS

ISAIAH 40:21-31; PSALM 147:1-11, 20;
1 CORINTHIANS 9:16-23; MARK 1:29-39

I never disturb the birds when they eat the figs from the tree I planted years ago. I don’t interrupt the neighborhood rabbits when they nibble on cilantro sprouts or broccoli seedlings. The garden produces enough to sustain our block of the urban ecosystem. God feeds all of us from creation’s generosity, even the birds and rabbits. “[God] gives to the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry” (Psalm 147:9).

God also has a relationship with the earth, with plants and animals, with ravens and fig trees, with hillsides and grasslands. “[God] covers the heavens with clouds, prepares rain for the earth,” the psalmist notices, and “makes grass grow on the hills” (verse 8). The Bible tells us that God attends to the natural world beyond human beings. However, as self-centered creatures we neglect the scriptures that display God’s connection with nature. The Creator doesn’t spurn a creature’s needs. God feeds young ravens because God hears them crying and isn’t heartless.

In *The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics*, biblical scholar Mari Joerstad explores God’s personal relationship with other-than-human life. Throughout the psalms, Joerstad observes, nature converses with God: “In the Psalter the world is not mute; it is sonorous, humming with voices.” The psalmist eavesdrops on the nonhuman natural world and offers revelations of God’s relationships with birds and rivers, cattle and trees, clouds and landscapes. “Personalistic nature texts,” as Joerstad calls these passages, invite us to care about our plant and animal neighbors, not in order to secure an environmental situation adequate for the survival of *Homo sapiens*, but because God loves this world and has offered us “a host of friends, a community that extends beyond our humanness.” I have relational work to do on interspecies friendship. The

neighborhood rabbit who visits my garden darts into the bushes when I approach.

FEBRUARY 14

POLICE KILL

2 KINGS 2:1-12; PSALM 50:1-6;
2 CORINTHIANS 4:3-6; MARK 9:2-9

"This is my Son, the Beloved," a voice announces from heaven (Mark 9:7). This scene recalls the theophany in Exodus when God etched the commandments into stone. Like Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:29-35), God transfigures Jesus' countenance. Here, in Mark's story, the covenant becomes flesh in Jesus, this child of Israel. And this covenant is love. Jesus is the incarnation of divine belovedness. His life will declare God's love.

God's law is not in competition with God's love. Jon D. Levenson explains that the people of God receive the covenant at Sinai not "as the antithesis of love, or love as a substitute for law, but love made practical, reliable, reciprocal, and socially responsible through law, divine law observed in love." The revelation at Jesus' transfiguration does not replace what God offered at Sinai. The voice from heaven in Mark's gospel is the same voice that spoke to Moses.

The life of Jesus, God's law incarnate, is not a contrast to Torah's commands but to our society's legal system, where politicians justify the violence of prisons and policing as necessary to maintain order, even if some people are sacrificed—primarily Black lives, a demographic incarcerated at rates that expose the systemic injustice of the justice system, the racial prejudice endemic to the law-and-order complex.

At the transfiguration, when our attention turns to Jesus' life as the embodiment of God's covenantal law, we're invited to align ourselves with Sinai's commandments. For example, Jesus demonstrates obedience to God's prohibition against killing—"Thou shalt not kill"—because every life belongs to God, every person is a beloved child of God. To kill violates God's command. Christian police officers disbelieve in Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God's covenantal love when they strap their bodies to death's weapons—we believe with our bodies; we can't separate a belief in the head from a belief in a hand articulated with a gun.

FEBRUARY 21

THE RAINBOW SIGN

GENESIS 9:8-17; PSALM 25:1-10;
1 PETER 3:18-22; MARK 1:9-15

"I have set my bow in the clouds," God declares after the flood (Genesis 9:13). The language in this story has produced our English word "rainbow." The Hebrew word in the verse, *qeshet*, refers to a bow and arrow. This is imagery from archery, the advanced military weaponry of that era. "Always, the word *qeshet* designates a weapon of war," Bible scholar Nahum M. Sarna notes in his *Understanding Genesis*, "the symbol of divine bellicosity and hostility has been transformed into a token of eternal reconciliation between God and Man." The rainbow is a sign of God's disarmament, the retirement of God's war-bow to the sky, an unloaded weapon pointing away from the earth.

We enter Lent, a season of reckoning: to contemplate, to meditate on who we are, on what we do, and on who we are becoming. This biblical origin story reckons with violence, with bloodshed—that's the emphasis of the verses preceding today's passage. God warns Noah and his descendants against killing any animal, human or otherwise. For the shedding of blood, God says, "I will require a reckoning" (verse 5). Central to these postdiluvian commandments is the prohibition of killing, of spilling blood, because that vital fluid coursing through bodies belongs to God. To drain the God-given life force of creation from a person is an incursion into the domain of divinity. To kill is a declaration of war against God's reign, an act of rebellion against the Creator.

The rainbow is an invitation to a disarmed life with God. That's the covenant offered to humanity when God lays aside the warrior's bow. To live in God's renewed world does not require violence. All we need is the One who has promised to sustain our lives. There is no divine justification to spill another's blood. Every deathly act is a refusal of God's will.

**TO LIVE IN GOD'S RENEWED
WORLD DOES NOT REQUIRE
VIOLENCE.**

FEBRUARY 28

BEAR WITNESS

GENESIS 17:1-7, 15-16; PSALM 22:23-31;
ROMANS 4:13-25; MARK 8:31-38

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). This verse jolts me back to junior high and a T-shirt popular among my friends at youth group: On the front, an image of Jesus' crucifixion with "No pain, no gain" written at the foot of the cross; on the back, a picture of knees, raw and bloody, with the words, "Pray Hard."

I was taught that the Christian life was a spiritual workout, to exercise muscles of self-denial until they hurt—one more push-up, one more curl, one more sacrifice, one more day of prayer and fasting. Because "no pain, no gain." We threw our sense of self into "the Refiner's fire" as songwriter Brian Doerksen instructed us, and followed lifestyle guidance on gospel purity from seminars by Bill Gothard and Joshua Harris. They taught us that the Christian life was an obsession with individualistic piety—a spirituality that befits a culture focused on pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. If only we would learn to celebrate discipline, as Richard Foster insisted, then we'd be on the right path to spiritual growth.

When Jesus invites his disciples to take up the cross, he's pointing at the torturous mechanism of Rome's power to silence subversives, not to evangelical pietism. Jesus wants his followers to know what they're committing to: a political movement of revolutionary community that will make them enemies of the establishment.

But the pain of sacrifice isn't the point, nor is crucifixion. Jesus doesn't call for self-denial as a good in and of itself. The point, Jesus says, is to bear witness to the gospel of life even if such a decision will lead to execution at the hands of oppressors. "Those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel," Jesus says, "will save it" (Mark 8:35). ✱

"Preaching the Word," Sojourners' online resource for Bible study and sermon preparation, is available at sojo.net/ptw.

H'rumps



ARE WE BREATHING A SIGH OF RELIEF YET? HOW ABOUT NOW?

By Ed Spivey Jr.

How about now? Now can we exhale? Confident that our democracy is still clinging above the precipice of failure, its fingers sore from gripping an outcrop holding our country together, its legs dangling over the jagged stones of dictatorship below [almost finished with the metaphor], its feet clawing for a foothold of common ground, even though feet actually don't claw, but I can't think of the verb that feet do.

Anyway, Joe Biden won the election and finally countered that hurtful nickname of "Sleepy" by staying awake for most of his inauguration. Chief Justice John Roberts did his part by respectfully stifling a giggle when administering the oath of office to a man facing a Supreme Court that could nullify any action he takes. And none of the television cameras picked up Roberts mouthing "6 to 3, baby!"

It was a nice ceremony, marred only by Rudy Giuliani rushing the stage, waving documents and shouting something about fraud that nobody heard because we were distracted by how much he looks like a crazed jack-o'-lantern. Other than that, the nation finally celebrated a president who will usher in our long-awaited renewal. (But it turns out ushers only have the skills to separate friends of the bride and groom, so we turned off the television and resumed staring at the same four walls we've been looking at since March.)

Actually, none of that happened. I'm once again writing about future events because of a deadline that forces me to write only

**EXHALING FEELS GOOD,
ALTHOUGH WITH A MASK IT
FOGS UP YOUR GLASSES.**

about what's already occurred. And where's the fun in that? It's like giving yesterday's weather report. ("Make sure to take an umbrella, because it rained already.") I envy the people at Fox News who report confidently about things that haven't happened, such as the socialist takeover of the United States in the first week of the Biden administration. It's completely made up, but with a conviction that's disarmingly credible and stirs up viewers who justifiably fear that their Social Security checks, veterans' benefits, and Medicare coverage will be taken over by the government.

But about this hideous pathogen that continues to devastate our economy, weaken the life-saving abilities of our hospitals, and destabilize state and local governments. I'm talking about Mitch McConnell, of course, although "pathogen" might be an unfair description. Maybe "bacterium" better describes *bacillus mitchus*, a spineless organism with moist eyes that speaks—with no discernible movement of his lips—against the common good. Fortunately, he's not replicating at a cellular level, but he's in the bloodstream, and we can't seem to get rid of him. After 36 years in the Senate, he was re-elected for another six, despite the fact that his only constituent service is keeping Kentucky the 45th richest state in the nation. His campaign slogan of "Kentucky: At Least We're Not Mississippi!" seemed ill-chosen, but he won anyway. And his shameless obstructionism will continue apace. (Be assured, however, that during this time Susan Collins will express concern.)

On the plus side, the vaccine will be here soon. And it will be easily administered to Americans already in long lines for food. It's a win-win.

Still no Clorox wipes in stores, though. The science just isn't there yet. ✖

Ed Spivey Jr. is art director of *Sojourners* magazine.



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